THE DELIGHTFUL ROAD

G. L. WIND

To Lucy,

traveller with me on
the Delightful Road,

from Vic

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"You inconsiderate man! How can you make such an offer?" (Page 137.)

THE DELIGHTFUL ROAD

A Brave Man's Story

By G. L. WIND

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BY THE SAME AUTHOR: —

The Land of Sunny Days
The Pride of Graystone
Rex Amoris

NOTE.

No character in this book is patterned after any special person. Most of the material it contains is taken from the diary of George Willing, which was found, old and dusty, hidden away on the shelves of memory. It is fondly dedicated to all those people who will read it and remember that "not only by precept and example, but also by our mistakes do we learn."

New York, N. Y., 1930. G. L. W.

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CHAPTER I.

"YOU AND I."

At the time when our story begins, he was a young man, tall and strong, with a blond head, a clear brain, and a kindly heart. The world was bright, and life was a song. That blond head is turned white now, the tall frame is bent, the brain dimmed, but the heart remains unchanged. The world is still bright, and life is still a song, but tempered with both the sweetness and the sorrow of experience and endowed with a profounder meaning.

George Willing was his name. Back in his college days they turned that name around and called him "Willing George," which was significant. He believed in doing favors. It was his salient characteristic. His whole life was spent doing favors, spent in the service of others.

His mother was a widow, and George was her only son. There had been a little sister once. When she had died, following her father, George, only twelve then, had said bravely, "Now, Mother, now it's only you and I."

And she had answered with equal courage, "Yes, George, you and I."

Those words became their battle-cry, for they really fought a brave battle, those two. When George was born, she had already made up her mind as to what he should be, and no kind of adversity, not even sickness, poverty, or death, could sway her from that purpose.

George went to college. She went to work, in the city where she lived, as a servant. He had objected strenuously at first.

"Some things just can't be done, Mother. It's I who should work and make our living for us. I'm strong. You're not."

"Oh, yes, I am," she had rejoined. "And all things can be done, George, if only you're strong enough."

But he helped along wonderfully while at college. No young fellow held as many odd jobs as George Willing. He mowed lawns. He washed windows. He swept stables. In winter he shoveled snow. He even taught himself sewing and patched clothes for others. They began calling him "Mama Willing" then.

But when he turned out to be a veritable lion in all the sports, along with all his extra work and his studies, they forgot the "Mama Willing." He became the best pitcher and track-runner. He liked wrestling especially. He started a little wrestling club, and every one of his challengers proved a victim.

"Boys," he would say, smiling his big friendly smile, "I'll give you a fair start. Any old hold you want. There! All right, let's go. Uh!"

One after another they would try to get him down. That proved impossible. They made up their minds at last that he was the champion.

And champion he turned out to be in many things, in sincerity, in conduct, in good nature, — in studies, too.

"Some boy!" was the voluntary verdict of his classmates. "You can't help but like him. A success at almost everything he does, but it never even swells his head. He can put you down before you can count six, but he wouldn't hurt a flea. And he can work his head off without even feeling it."

"He could make something really big out of himself," remarked one classmate who didn't understand George Willing at all. "A fellow like that, why, what couldn't he do in the world of business! And here he is studying to be a preacher!"

"A preacher can do a whole lot in the world," reminded another.

And another said, "It's to please his mother that he's here. She always wanted him to be a preacher. He surely loves his mother. Writes to her about twice a week."

It was truly a different path which George and his mother traveled. She was a weak little woman, and whenever the task would grow wearisome for her, she would sit down and say bravely, "It's for George." And whenever he became discouraged, he would sit down and say, "It's for Mother." Both were right and neither ever proved a disappointment to the other.

Naturally, he often grew discouraged. It was due mostly to the fact that despite the valiant efforts of both the funds often didn't reach. He was not as economical as he could have been in his case. He liked to buy things, books, for instance. He accumulated an extensive library, more than he needed. Perhaps he shouldn't have done it just then. But it was his one passion.

However, he had a fairly good business sense, too. He kept a little book in which he always entered his financial standing. Very often it was a one-sided tragedy. Therein lay the frequent discouragements.

"Debts," he wrote to his mother, "are like soldiers. They fight you and try to bowl you over. I'm giving them a lusty battle with lawn-movers, window rags, brooms, pitchforks, and even darning-needles, but as quickly as I run one through, another jumps up to take its place. But don't worry, Mother. I'll get the best of them yet. I'll sweep the whole bothersome crowd off the face of my account book during my first year in office."

Of that first year in office there will be further things to say later.

George made good use of his growing library. He

finished those first years of his studies with fair results. So he was transferred to the seminary with a good report in his favor, but with a considerable deficit in his personal account book.

The seminary happened to be in a larger town, and he found opportunity for more and slightly better-paying extra work. His accounts balanced well enough that first year. But in the second year something crossed his path that disturbed the absolute serenity of his whole course.

It was a girl.

By this time George had grown uncommonly big and handsome. Every Sunday he brushed out his best suit and went to a certain family which had chosen to give him the benefits of Sunday dinner and society. And there was a daughter in that family, a beautiful, delicate blond girl. The weekly sight and company of her proved a potent thing for George. His big heart grew soft and sentimental. He bought himself a new suit and several shirts and a pair of gleaming new shoes. It cost him money. And he also spent much of his former work-time in dreaming. That, too, cost him something.

Perhaps the only reason he did not neglect his studies was his being conscious of what just the slightest decline in his grades would have meant to his mother.

"George," she wrote in one of her letters in that second year of his seminary days, "you don't write to me quite as you used to. Don't work too hard on that extra study, boy. We can manage. And if you have any more debts, don't worry. Everything will adjust itself."

So George, feeling very much stricken, confessed to her and told her the truth.

"Mother, it's a girl that takes up some of my time now. But what a girl she is, Mother! The daughter of my benefactors. Alice! Did you ever think, Mother, that I'd

begin to like a girl named Alice?" (Much more about Alice and then:) "About those debts — well, there aren't many. I can take care of them. And please don't send any tuition-money yet. I'm going to see about that soon. . . ."

Enclosed was a little photo of Alice. For a long time George's mother gazed at that young face, which had come quickly between her and her son, and she tried to be as generous as possible. Alice was a proud girl, that she could see. And she was a girl accustomed to things. George's mother sat down and wondered about it all. But she said nothing to her son.

Those years at the seminary passed by quickly. Much could be said about them, and most of it would be to George's advantage. But in the story of a life we touch only the high points. The real life of George began later. On graduation day he stood before a gathered assembly and made a glowing speech. He was a very polished, immaculate George, strong, deep-voiced, never proud, but always confident.

"The whole life of a minister," he said with a great certainty, "is a path that leads to a golden goal. That goal is to have taught the world the only truth as God gave it. It is a path full of stones and stumbling-blocks, — disappointment, adversity, sacrifice, even want, — but it finally leads to glory and riches. Glory and riches? Yes. Let us not be blind to real things. To win a man for his God, that is glory; and to keep him with his God, that is riches. The life of a minister may be a difficult path, but remember it is always a *delightful road*."

His mother was there, sitting motionless in the audience, bright of face, shining of eyes, proud of him. That moment when he spoke, and later, when they gave him his diploma and shook his hand, it was the glowing victory after her

struggle of years. She cried tears of joy, and her eyes were still red when she kissed him in congratulation.

"I only hope, George," she whispered, "that your first charge will not be too far away, so that we can see each other once in a while at least."

"But listen, Mother," he answered, his arm about her, "all your work is over now. You're going to live with me."

"No, George." She shook her head. "I'm still strong. I'll go on for a while. God bless you!"

She was thinking secretly of the extra debts that had to be incurred during that last year. And she was thinking, too, of Alice. What of Alice?

He brought Alice over a little later and introduced her to his mother.

"This is my mother — the best little mother in the world."

Alice kissed her and said that there could be no doubt of that.

"I know there isn't," George averred.

But this graduation evening belonged to Alice. George's mother saw that. She willingly withdrew.

"Go with her, boy," she said to her son. "She's very sweet. You can see me to-morrow. I'll be here a few days. This is your evening — and hers."

"Well," George admitted, "we did want to take a little buggy-ride —"

"Of course. Go and have a good time."

It must be remembered that this was the "golden age" of the horse, when practicable gasoline motors were still curiosities to scientists and unknown things to most people.

That buggy-ride with Alice proved a revelation to him. They rode in an elegant carriage, hired from a livery-stable, the very stable in which George had worked to earn extra money. Now he drove one of its finest horses. It

was a triumph for him, the manner of the ride, but hardly the outcome.

It wouldn't be of true interest to record much of the conversation which took place between Alice and George on that evening. In his diary, which George had kept from the first, there are very few words given to it. He put it down as a bitter affair, just one of life's many mistakes.

Only a few things will suffice to show her position, which she had never really exhibited to him before.

He said happily, "Well, I'm through now. My work begins. It's a wonderful work. I'm convinced of that. A man has to believe in his work, love it —"

She said, "Yes." And she sighed a queer sigh.

He asked, "Why, what's wrong, Alice?"

"It's hard work," she said, "and never appreciated and always underpaid. It's a lifelong struggle, George, really!"

It struck him to abrupt silence, coming so completely unexpected, but he rallied quickly.

"Oh, of course. A struggle, no doubt. But it's a struggle that makes for real happiness. In life we take our greatest satisfaction from winning our battles, paving our rough way, conquering all difficulties."

"Yes, but it takes strength, George, always to be fighting."

"Why, yes. Strength. Of course. But the fighting is worth while."

"Fighting many times for your very bread! I can imagine what it is."

His throat felt like lead. It seemed as if a lightning bolt had descended on him. He sat there in that fine buggy, overwhelmed, stunned, thankful for the darkness. And he said nothing; he couldn't find a single word.

She could not see the pain in his face, but his strange silence made her wonder. So she explained.

"If only," she said with stinging suddenness, "you hadn't become a minister, George."

"What!" he exclaimed, so sharply that it scared her.

"Oh, George, please don't be angry! It's better to be frank, isn't it? You could be something else, George — a great success, too — a man like you, so intelligent, so handsome —"

"Alice," he interrupted, "don't —"

"No, I really mean it, George. We were never really frank about this —"

"We are now," he cut in very bitterly.

"Yes. Why not? Think it over, George. They'll send you to some little place, and it will mean — oh, you know what I want to say!"

"Yes, I know."

"Well, why not be sensible? You could make good very quickly in something else. My father said he would start you off —"

"No," he said heavily. "You don't understand, Alice. You saw my mother and the look in her eyes to-night. That I am what I am was her wish; my life-work is her victory. But that's not all. I feel as she does. I really believe that I couldn't spend my life in any better way than I've chosen to do. Nothing could change my mind, least of all the prospect of a struggle ahead. No, Alice."

It cost him much strength to say it, but the words came from him like the strong thrusts of a sword, with no kind of weakness in them. But for him, poor boy, the stars had gone out of that fragrant night, and the moon was dimmed, and the joy in his breast had turned to cold ashes.

Later when he came back to his mother, slowly, like one utterly stricken, his big shoulders sagging, she saw in his eyes what he felt and what he had experienced. It required no explanation from him whatsoever.

"George," she told him, "I knew. I felt it. And I understand. Don't let it hurt you. You're strong. After all, happiness can't possibly come where one has been weak. — Did you love her, George?"

"I thought I did. I" — he would not finish; he simply drove his hands into his hair and sat down heavily in silence.

She waited long moments before she spoke again.

"It will pass over," she finally said. "You're very young. You're like a little boy who has built himself a little house, a house of sand, and it has just fallen over. That's all. A little disappointment, George. You'll meet another girl — sometime."

"No, Mother, I'm through with that. I've learned. Hereafter there'll be no woman in my life — but you."

She couldn't help laughing very merrily at that. She took his head in her hands and rumpled his blond hair.

"Oh, George," she cried, "you boy, you! You'll grow up soon and become a man. And then you'll laugh at yourself."

"Now you've got to come with me wherever I go," he charged her almost fiercely. "I won't have it any different. You and I, Mother."

She sat down and looked at him for a minute. Then she said again, "No, not yet. I'll come some day, George — if you still want me then."

"Mother!"

Very tenderly she smiled at his great sincerity. "You see we can't look ahead, George. We must wait for things. You are too impatient, boy. Just now it's not practical. There are still debts to pay."

"I'll pay all of that! Don't worry!"

"Yes, I know. I know you want to, George! But —"

"And I will! I don't want you to slave yourself another

single minute on my account. The tuition-money for this last year — it will stand over. They agreed to that, and I'll pay it next year. It'll be simple."

"We can't look ahead, George," she told him again. "If we could, it would really be simple."

So it was agreed that they would separate again.

The next day he received his call. His case, we might say, was a specific one. It started off with a paradox. He had been born and raised in the city, and he was sent to virgin country.

"Sunken Hollow," he read with his eyes rather dubiously on the name of the place where his future work was to be. "What is it? Is it on the map?"

They could not find it on the map, but after a while, with the help of an atlas, they could definitely locate its position. It seemed that her hope — and his hope — was not to be fulfilled. Sunken Hollow was far distant from where George's mother worked. They would be hundreds of miles apart.

Her heart felt very heavy indeed for the rest of that day. But two months later, when his last summer vacation was over, and she went with him to the railroad station and watched him board the train that was to take him from her, her eyes were brave, and her lips were smiling. She shed no tears, for his sake.

"Good-by, my boy," she said. "And God bless you!"

When he was gone, then she shed tears.

CHAPTER II.

A PLACE IN THE SUN.

Sunken Hollow was not a town. It was a number of townships, nearly unpopulated. At first glance the bulk of its population seemed to consist wholly of corn-stalks, scarecrows, and blackbirds by the thousands. But there were people, too, as George learned later.

Now, after so many years, he looks back upon that day of his coming to Sunken Hollow with a reminiscent smile, though it was something just short of calamity to him then.

The station was not a station. It was a milk-stand full of empty cans. He had never seen so many milk-cans. They fascinated him. He stood, his heavy satchel in his hand, and gazed at them, piled three high, in long rows.

Near him he presently noticed a man standing, silent as a statue, waiting, with a stolid, respectful air. A man in blue overalls, with extremely yellow hair, watery blue eyes, and an enormous mustache.

"Oh," said George, "I beg your pardon, but are you —"

"Yah," said the man in a booming tone and made a single clumsy beckoning motion with his hand.

Obediently George followed him. Walking along in queer silence, they came to an open spring-wagon. An appallingly bony old mare was hitched to it, every one of her ribs visible under her quivering skin, standing in an attitude of patient resignation, if not actual slumber. Noticing the new pastor, she seemed to awake and, turning her head slightly, gazed at him with a blind eye, but refrained from making any comment.

Still in absolute silence, George and the man boarded the questionable vehicle, George first heaving up his heavy satchel. As soon as they were seated, the old mare started automatically.

Nineteen miles they rolled along under the burning sun. The axles of the old wagon squeaked with pain, the mare snorted periodically like a sufferer from asthma and began to stream with honest sweat, and George's whole body ached from the strain of sitting stiffly upright and being thoroughly shaken about.

And all the while he tried valiantly to establish social contact with his strangely silent partner on the driver's seat. But he failed miserably. The man answered every question with a sonorous "yah." George gave it up finally, not wishing to embarrass him unduly.

At last the nineteen miles were safely behind them. George's host-to-be, according to a letter which he had in his pocket, was a farmer named John Stark. When the panting mare stopped automatically in front of a little frame house and began eating eagerly from the low branch of a maple-tree, George somehow knew that his destination had been reached. He climbed down from that seat of torture and stretched his limbs.

From the house that moment a little figure rushed — Mrs. Stark. She was breathing heavily with some inner excitement. Her welcome was so spontaneous that it made George blush profusely. Holding both his hands, she emitted an avalanche of pleased words.

"So you are the new pastor. Well, well, what a fine big man, sure enough. Oh, it's a shame you had to ride in that old wreck, and I told John so, but you know how John is, he never knows just what's polite and right. — Well, how do you like Sunken Hollow? It's not really a town, you know, you sort of have to get used to it first. Oh, yes. — Did you have a nice trip on the railroad, did you? I suppose you're tired and hungry — and I see you need a good wash, too. Well, I got everything ready,

Pastor. Now you should feel just like you feel at home, and remember you mustn't be bashful."

"I suppose you are Mrs. Stark," George said politely. "I'm very glad to know you."

"Oh, sure, I'm Mrs. Stark. Come right in, Pastor. You'll get to know me better pretty soon." She turned and spoke to the man who had driven George from the station. "Axel, you take that silly old tree-eating animal out of here. It's a shame John told you to get our new pastor with that lame kangaroo. He ought to be shot anyway. Good for nothing and blind in one eye. Go on!" And she added some few words in a strange tongue before Axel seemed to understand. "Come right in, Pastor."

"He doesn't talk much, does he?" George asked her, referring to Axel.

"Oh, him? Well," she answered, "he understands everything, but he can't talk yet. He's a Swede. That's Swedish I just talked to him. He's our hired man, you know."

"Oh, I see," said George.

So a Swedish hired man had been his reception committee, he thought to himself. At any other time he would have laughed.

When John Stark came to the house, around suppertime, George had already begun to accustom himself to Mrs. Stark's ever-flowing speech. Her husband, a little old man, was not the talker she was, but he could hold his own until she would interrupt.

He began by making excuses, not meeting George's eye squarely as he spoke.

"Well, you see, Pastor, you just had to come along right in the middle of the busy thrashing season. All the good horses were working, and the good wagons, too, so —"

"Yes, I told him everything," Mrs. Stark threw in. "He knows you already. Go on and wash yourself and listen —

leave that clean towel with the blue border alone. That's Revner Willing's from now on."

George enjoyed the supper. After the meal was over, Mrs. Stark took him about the farmyard and showed him all her possessions. She had a mania for raising chickens. The Starks were fairly successful farmers. Indeed, as George had gathered from all her remarks so far, all the members of his church-to-be were well situated and lacking but little.

Mrs. Stark was so nice to him that George wished to pay her some kind of compliment.

"Well, you've certainly got a set of wonderful chickens there," he told her as they walked about.

"Oh, yes," she said, "I raise them by the hundreds."

"And even young turkeys, too, I see."

"Turkeys?" she asked, nonplussed. "Where?"

George pointed out what he believed to be turkeys and was rewarded with a volley of laughter from her.

"Turkeys!" she screamed. "Och! Why, them's guinea-hens! Oh, Pastor!"

George choked a bit and laughed as hard as he could with her, and then she shocked him a little by pointing out a young calf prancing merrily inside a board fence and advising him in sputtering tone, "Be sure now, Pastor, that's no camel!"

It was not the only time that George's city ways and ideas drew a solid laugh from his rural parishioners. Later he became country-minded himself.

They showed him the church that same evening, before sundown. It was a little frame building near by, which he had innocently taken to be a barn.

"We really should have a new one," John Stark explained, "but it seems we just never get to building one."

"Yes, they've been talking new church for twenty years," said Mrs. Stark. "Just look at them front steps!

It's a shame! Be careful now, Revner, so you don't go through!"

George was tenderly careful in ascending them. But under his considerable weight a half-rotten board suddenly cracked. His left leg went through with a crash and a rip, tearing his best trousers.

Immediately Mrs. Stark wailed a volley of lament and began scolding her husband for negligence and a number of other things, and John Stark took up the battle and shot back. With all the dignity he could command, George drew his leg out of the aperture and brushed off all the different kinds of low-animal life it had suddenly attracted. Mrs. Stark helped him while John Stark looked on stupidly.

"Oh, what a shame," she kept repeating, "oh, what a shame! Now, why wasn't it John, or Old Weissman, or Peters, or somebody like that who should break through there with his leg instead of our new pastor!"

"It's all right, of course," George told her several times, trying to laugh, but she kept on.

"A little hard luck," philosophized John Stark, but he was compelled to dodge a vigorous thrust from his wife.

The interior of the church caused a sinking feeling in George's heart. He would just have to get used to it first, he thought, applying the philosophy of Mrs. Stark. One could get used to all things. It wasn't the place where he would preach that was important; it was what he would preach and how it would be received.

But what depressed him even more was the parsonage of Sunken Hollow; for a free parsonage was included in the list of remunerations which he was to receive for his services in the congregation. It was a frame country house with about twelve large rooms. As he passed uncertainly through those bare enclosures, his footsteps echoed dully behind him. It seemed altogether forsaken, desolate. From

the kitchen windows he looked upon rows of gravestones — the parish cemetery.

"It isn't necessary that — that I actually live here for the first, is it?" he asked a bit deferentially of Mrs. Stark.

She looked at him dubiously at first, but then she seemed to understand. "Oh, I know what you mean," she answered, smiling a sweet, slow smile. "You can live with us as long as you like, Pastor."

"Good!" exclaimed George. Mrs. Stark was his friend surely.

"Oh, it's a big place," John Stark remarked. "But our last preacher, you see, he had a large family."

George will ever remember the first night he spent out there in Sunken Hollow.

Dark and quiet. Cavelike darkness, the intense gloom of a night in the country, with only the stars far overhead for a light. And the quiet, the unbroken, deathlike hush of a closed tomb. A complete stillness, which time and again woke him out of his fitful slumbers.

Stiffly he lay in his bed, mostly wide awake, perspiring, his pulse beating, listening to certain ominous howlings outside, which came all of a sudden at intervals and seemed like the sounds of a nether world, but which, he later learned, were only the love notes of night-owls. He lay there wondering — wondering about everything.

Where indeed had he been sent? What had they done to him? Sunken Hollow! What a name! What a place! What happened to him?

The new preacher of Sunken Hollow? Cold sweat gathered on his brow. Could he, George Willing, ever live up to that? He doubted it then.

But he did live up to it and nicely, as we shall see.

He spent the following morning writing a long letter, telling his mother all about it. But he was a brave boy, was George Willing. From that letter of his she never

even gathered, though she was accomplished in reading between lines, how low in spirit, how utterly disappointed, he was. We shall quote only parts of his missive: —

". . . Well, Mother, I've found my little place in the sun. That's what Sunken Hollow turned out to be exactly.

"It's country — deep, unspoiled, well-nigh uninhabited country, with the scent of the corn and the new-mown hay and pigs and chickens and all those things. I'll certainly have no trouble in finding material for my nature studies out here. . . .

"I'm staying with really fine people, the Starks. She is a wonderful woman and has already told me more about my future church than I could have learned myself in weeks. The board and the meals are very good; only I'm finding it a bit hard to convince good Mrs. Stark that I'm really not able to eat as much as the average farmer, even though I am a big fellow. . . .

"The church, which isn't so impressive, is a temporary affair, I believe. At least John Stark spoke of building a new one. At present they're going to have new front steps, that's certain. Let me tell you about that. . . .

". . . I'm also furnished with a parsonage, but, of course, I'm not going to use it, Mother. It's a big, empty barn. The rooms are immense and high, and think of it, there's a cemetery in the back yard. No; I'm staying with the Starks for the present. I don't need a house. Don't believe I'll ever get married, Mother; you know my experience. When you get ready to live with me, then we might fix up that parsonage. I think it can be done. . . .

"Oh, I almost forgot to tell you about my first reception at the station. That was really a good one, Mother. . . ."

That letter did much to ease his sore mind that morning; and by and by things began to look at least a little different to the new minister of Sunken Hollow.

CHAPTER III.

THE GREAT CHANGE.

"I'm to be your pastor," said George Willing in his deep, vibrant tone. "You shall hear my voice often. Always it shall be saying the things which God has given to man in His Word. I am happy to be His servant. I know that sometimes this great work of mine may be difficult, sometimes discouraging, sometimes wearisome, but always I shall try to conquer my own desires and give myself entirely to it. I know that I could find no better activity on earth; I know that life could not be lived in a more blessed way. No matter what it may hold, always it shall be a great joy to me, always a *delightful road.*"

He stood in the narrow wooden pulpit of that poor little church which was so desperately in need of being razed to make way for a new one. Before him in yellow wooden pews sat his people.

A hardy, stolid lot were his people. Not given to any frills in the matter of Sunday attire, they sat before their new minister in dresses and coats growing green with age and frayed with use. Only the younger set and the children looked somewhat different in this respect.

Most of the older men wore beards, fierce, scraggly ones, and the young men's faces glowed with the flush of daily life in the sun. The women, almost without exception, were plump to a generous measure, and the young ladies and children radiated with health. All the people, old and young, seemed to enjoy freedom from any kind of worry.

George, seeing all those eager faces, turned a little sick and dizzy. The interior of the church was swelteringly hot; he could feel the sweat running down his back in

small torrents. On his forehead it stood in large, glistening beads. Frequently he put up his white kerchief to brush them away.

"The poor man!" thought Mrs. Stark, sitting stiffly upright in a front pew. "He's nervous. Only a boy, far away from his mother, and with his first sermon here and all that. Oh, it's too much! Well, I'm going to make a good home for him at least."

Outside, all around the church, the farmers' buggies stood with their horses languidly drooping in the burning sun. At times the horses, growing impatient of the heat and the bothering flies, whinnied loudly, and George would suddenly stop in his sermon as though startled.

"He'll have to get used to that," a farmer whispered to his neighbor, — "to them horses, I mean."

"He'll have to get used to lots of things," the other whispered back. "You can see he ain't used to the country. Wait till he sees those wasps buzzing around the pulpit."

George had soon noticed the wasps. They made his preaching increasingly difficult. He had a singular kind of respect for stinging insects. Once in his college days he had inadvertently sat down on a bee in the high grass. The bee had used its intelligence in defense of itself. Ever since that George had carefully avoided bees. And now here were wasps, yellow-jackets, big fellows that sang about his head as he preached and sat down on his Bible when he wanted to turn the pages. It was high torture.

But he completed his opening sermon in Sunken Hollow without serious accident. When the service was over, he shook hands with the people. They gave him a rather hearty reception.

Old Weissman, with whom George was to have many dealings later, tendered him a piece of good advice.

"Let me tell you, Pastor, you mustn't slap at them

hornets. They won't sting if you let 'em be. We can't put screens on the church windows, you know; it wouldn't pay for just one day a week. Our last preacher, he wasn't stung by a wasp in fifteen years."

"Well, I'll try to make friends with them," George promised.

And Mrs. Stark whispered to him a moment later, "Don't you listen to Old Weissman, Pastor. That's the stingiest old man that ever walked in shoes. You'll find that out for yourself yet."

Mrs. Stark was his able instructor in the things of rural life. She turned out to be a second mother to him. In time she changed his urban mind, and he began to appreciate the country. She taught him the rudiments of vegetable raising, chicken-fancying, milking, and other fine arts of the farm. George applied himself patiently to everything.

The letters he wrote to his mother never indicated anything but that he was wholly satisfied and happy. Of those matters which could not be changed he said nothing.

The long days with no proper companionship oppressed him. Often he would seek refuge in the woods and try to forget his increasing loneliness. When that failed, he would put on old clothes and pitch hay, hoe potatoes, stack corn, churn butter, feed pigs, or do anything. He proved a great help to Mrs. Stark around the house and sometimes to Mr. Stark in the field.

It seemed entirely impossible for him to study much in those first months. His mind was not at rest. He had overcome his disappointment in regard to Alice, but now and then, on a particularly desolate day, it would trouble him.

How different things would be if he had listened to Alice! he would think sometimes. But then he put the thought down immediately. Her view was not his. They could never have agreed. And sometimes he wondered what

she was doing and just how she had gotten over her own disappointment or whether indeed it had been a disappointment for her at all.

He was not long alone with such thoughts of his. Mrs. Stark, who was a mother of young men herself, having six grown and married sons, read his ponderings quite accurately. And she knew the cure for the malady. What he wanted, needed badly, was youthful companionship.

She sat down and considered his case, saying nothing at all to him, of course. While he drooped, she was busily planning. Her active mind did not fail her long.

Over in a neighboring place, in Bitter Point, to be exact, was another church and a little parish-school. The teacher of the parish-school was a certain Mr. Meller. This Mr. Meller had a daughter. She was the fifth of nine children, and because her father drew a salary which was smaller even than George Willing's, she was compelled to work as a maid for a farmer whose place was near Bitter Point. Mrs. Stark knew that farmer very well, for she often bought and sold chickens there. And she knew Mary Meller, too, and, as already related, also knew what her young pastor, George Willing, needed.

So, knowing 'most everything, she began doing something.

"Pastor," she said to George one day that fall, "could you go along in the buggy to-day? I want to fetch some Plymouth Rock hens from over near Bitter Point."

"Certainly," he agreed, and that was the beginning of a great change in him.

How Mary Meller and George Willing met, comprises a fascinating little chapter in George's memory book and will bear recording.

Plymouth Rock hens, of course, were farthest from Mrs. Stark's mind. Arrived at Bitter Point, she first made

certain that Mary Meller was in the farmer's kitchen, and then she took George in, all of a sudden, like a bolt out of the blue, to be introduced.

Naturally this was not quite fair to Mary. If Mary could have had but half a hand in her own destiny, she would have asked for time at least to be able to don her pretty dress. As it was, she met George in a washed-out gingham and over a panful of dinner dishes. With a little more time she could have assumed at least some little lofty air.

George's sudden entrance into the hot kitchen scared her half to death. And her frightened look scared George very much in truth. It was not quite fair to him either.

Both seemed helpless, but Mrs. Stark knew her forms of introduction.

"Oh, Mary," she began, "did you meet our new pastor already, Revner Willing?"

Frantically almost Mary began wiping her wet right hand on a dish-towel.

"Oh," she faltered faintly, faintly — "yes, — I mean, no I didn't. Papa said something about him, I think."

She couldn't know how really attractive her confusion was. George did not notice the washed-out gingham, but he did see how prettily the brown curls of her hair were scattered on a perspiring little forehead. And he could not help seeing the brown eyes.

With gravity he accepted the small, wet hand which she extended while Mrs. Stark explained everything to him.

"She's the daughter of old Teacher Meller; you know you met him when you was installed that Sunday. Don't you remember?" she prompted because George suddenly seemed so ponderous and slow.

"Oh, yes," said George as if hauling it out from a great depth. "Oh, yes!"

"Yes," said Mary and drew a quick little breath and smiled. Her eyes were grave till she smiled. "Well, how do you like it by this time, Pastor Willing, in Sunken Hollow?" she asked shyly.

"Oh, I like it," said George; "I'm getting to like it better every day."

"Well," she said, "that's good." And during the heavy pause that fell she smiled and twisted her fingers. Painfully conscious of her dress and the dishes, she put up her chin, trying to imitate some queenly kind of look. George thought the imitation very good.

This was too much silence for Mrs. Stark. It proved embarrassing. She said, "Well, we'd better go along now. We can't stay, really. We've got to look at some hens yet."

"Oh, yes," said Mary, feeling, as girls can feel, that the gentleman she had just met was studying her rather intently.

George seemed to wake up suddenly and said, "Yes. Well, I was certainly glad to meet you, Miss Meller."

With dignity she nodded, but blushed brightly.

"The Revner will come over and visit your father sometime, I'm sure," said Mrs. Stark to her. "Won't you, Pastor?"

"Oh, certainly," agreed George.

"All right," said Mary.

"Well, good-by," said George.

"Well — good-by," was the answer.

Mrs. Stark had performed a very good turn. While George left the kitchen, he was wondering vaguely how a hand which was always in dishwater could remain so small and delicate and soft to the touch. And Mary, inside, skipped quickly to the window and peered very cautiously through the curtains as he left, a fairly certain sign that she was not altogether outraged or displeased.

Then George helped Mrs. Stark select her Plymouth Rock hens. But his mind was not on it. He went about picking up the birds with his hands, gazing at them dreamily.

"Hey, that's a duck you got there," the farmer reminded him once, regarding him curiously.

"Oh, yes," George acknowledged, dropping the fowl at once and laughing a strained laugh. "So it is. A duck, yes, of course."

That evening Mary Meller told her mother as casually as possible what they had missed in not having attended the installation service of the new minister of Sunken Hollow.

"He's over six feet high, I guess," she said. "And he's got blond, curly hair and a low voice. Very fine-looking. Just as Papa said."

"Yes?" said Mrs. Meller. "Well, I'm sorry I was sick that Sunday. But you could have gone over."

Mary hadn't wanted to. "I know what people would think," she had proudly said and had purposely stayed away.

"Now," she went on after a slight pause, "he said he was coming over soon to get better acquainted with papa."

"So?" said Mrs. Meller, looking up sharply at her daughter and seeing a slight flush on her cheeks that was not ordinary. "Hm! Well, that's very nice of him."

While they were talking — over in the Stark house — under the green-shaded kerosene lamp, George was writing a letter to his mother.

". . . Well, things are brightening up a good bit, Mother. I never thought I'd get quite used to the country, but I'm actually beginning to like it. It's wonderful to sit in the woods and just think. If you want a grand sight, look over these wide fields. The nights are so quiet and restful; a night in the country with a big, round, golden

moon and all the stars is like a night in some fairyland. Met a girl to-day, by the way, a daughter of the teacher over in Bitter Point. Very pretty little thing, brown curls and brown eyes. Just think, instead of getting an education or something, she has to wash dishes for a farmer. It's because her father gets such a small salary. I wonder how they got along anyway so many years. They have nine children, I believe. This girl is very bright. Any one could see that. Her father is a good old fellow, too; I surely want to know him better.

"Somehow I can't study to-night. These country evenings get into the blood, I guess. To-morrow I'm going over into that empty parsonage of mine and see what can be done about it. It's all right here at the Stark's, but I really have very little privacy. Mrs. Stark talks all the time. Maybe I could furnish just one room in the parsonage and make it cozy. It would be a start. If the whole thing should ever be furnished all at once, it would mean quite an outlay. I've paid off some of the old college debts. If they'd only give me a little larger salary, I could clear them soon enough. Enclosed is some money for you. Buy yourself some new things. Perhaps you'd better send me two of those shirts; you know the kind I like. A person can't buy anything like that around here. Most of the men don't even wear collars; they've got beards that hide their necks completely. I'm raising a mustache myself; started to leave it grow this afternoon because I overheard Mrs. Stark saying to her husband, 'He's such a boy yet.' That's what they think of me, Mother. . . ."

CHAPTER IV.

LOVE LAUGHS.

In the history of the world many men, under the influence of certain conditions, have changed their minds. For George Willing the conditions in Sunken Hollow had gradually become right. So he changed his mind. He began to like the country and all his work and life in it.

Reasons for it were more than one, although most of the others were subordinated to the one.

It was primarily the knowledge that Mary Meller was in the world and only some six miles distant from Sunken Hollow that revived George's sagging mental activity. He soon became a paragon of fire and zeal, a loved preacher, and a good friend. He must not be blamed for first needing a spark to find his stride. Adam, the first man, made in holiness, had needed what George needed; the Lord saw that, so He gave him Eve. The Lord, in His unfailing wisdom, gave Mary to George. We shall speak of that later, however.

Because George had a great love for his work, and because he forgot himself completely and preached the Word of God in all its truth, the people of Sunken Hollow looked forward eagerly to every Sunday.

His personal visits to his church-members were also looked forward to with delight. He was their friend. They liked him immensely, these simple farmers, chiefly because of his own simplicity. He had refinement, but no loftiness. He held a high position, but assumed no theatrical dignity. He enjoyed their respect, but it did not make him become proud. He would not seek to impress them with his education, but rather with his sincerity. He had the wisdom that is really wise, the wisdom of knowing how to be truly

humble. And the farmers, simple as they were, proved wise enough to see it. So they loved him.

And they listened to him, too. The people of Sunken Hollow needed all kinds of friendly counsel, well-meaning advice, sometimes even sharp censure. Because George generally had the confidence of the person to whom he spoke, his words carried weight.

He found his interest in things pertaining to the farm gradually growing. The great wide fields began to fascinate him and to make him wonder. Here, he considered, in these spaces of blessed ground, was the life of the whole world and the activity of all its people. Here was the energy that made man move and subsequently made all earthly wisdom and industry. There was really nothing humble here; he, George Willing, lived in the midst of the greatest miracle that the Creator performs on earth. Thoughts like these increased his humility and broadened his understanding.

He made good friends with the dumb creatures of the barnyard. It became a pleasure and a habit to be with them, to feed them, to fondle them. Chickens, ducks, cows, horses, pigs — all seemed to know him and feel a distinct joy at his presence. The only kind of animal life he still misunderstood was the swarm of wasps that buzzed every Sunday about his pulpit. They never missed a service. He had learned by this time to ignore them.

A great deal of his spontaneous interest, in fact, sometimes all of it, was settled, of course, in Mary Meller. She was a compellingly sweet and pretty young person, who could smile a ray of light into any serious situation. George never needed spectacles nor psychology to realize it.

In the country, in those days, a courtship could be indicated quickly by one significant gesture — the buggy-ride.

If a young man asked a young lady to go buggy-riding, the good people of Sunken Hollow would begin to smile and look forward to a wedding.

George Willing asked Mary Meller to go buggy-riding, not once, but so many times that Mrs. Stark finally stopped counting them.

Mrs. Stark, with reference to George and Mary, seemed a bit too impatient. George avoided her veiled proddings. For a very good reason he did not wish to hurry things. Due to his meager means he was financially in a very pitiful state. He had been paying off old debts with his salary. There was no immediate outlook for a brighter financial future. He wished to wait. He saw the folly of involving a second person in his straitened affairs. He loved Mary too much to load her down with money responsibilities from the start.

However, love sometimes laughs at empty purses, if it's strong enough. In this case it was. On one of those buggy-rides in the pale moonlight along the quiet country lane, while frogs sang in the wayside marshes and fireflies by the hundreds blinked off and on in the soft darkness, George said the words that changed all his sensible ideas in a moment.

Since they first had met, Mary had conquered her shyness very nicely. She had the pride which is natural in intelligent young women, and because of it George was kept always a little in doubt as to just where and how he stood in her opinions. It finally began to frighten him. So that evening he started craftily to speak of Alice, just a word or two to make Mary jealous.

He watched very closely, and in the darkness he saw her body stiffen a little, only for a brief instant; but it was enough. Happiness thrilled him through.

"I wanted to tell you before — about her," he said cryptically.

He waited. So did she. It was not like Mary Meller to ask an anxious question or two at this point, no matter how cold and crushed she may have felt at his words.

"I suppose it surprised you, didn't it?" he prompted.

"Oh, no. It's all right."

"What's all right?"

"Well, that you have a — a girl."

"But I haven't. Oh, that's a mistake! I mean — about Alice — that's all past now."

"Oh," she said. Happily, he thought, and a bit suddenly.

"Wouldn't you like to hear the story?"

"Well, — I don't care."

"Well, even if you don't, I'm going to tell it. She was the daughter of my benefactors. We were friends. She seemed much interested in my work. Then once she said, 'If only you hadn't become a minister.' Those were her exact words. They hurt me, those words. And they showed me that she and I would never understand each other. That's all."

Mary had nothing to say. They drove on for a while in awkward silence. The night was still except for the frogs and a gentle, murmuring breeze in the trees.

"What do you think of it?" he asked finally.

"What should I think?"

After a pause he spoke again.

"Well, do you know what I think?"

"What?"

"I'm glad! I'm glad — now! I'm happy it never turned out to be."

His voice seemed strained. Mary stirred slightly, but still said nothing. She couldn't. She was very young, and it was her first experience with love. She had read so much about it in stories. It was wonderful.

"Mary!" he whispered. And he stopped the horse. His voice, when he tried to speak, seemed completely gone. It was difficult, this. "Mary," he began again, "it's like night and day — the difference between you two — between Alice and you, I mean." He stopped. "Are you listening, Mary?"

Uncertainly she glanced up at him. His face was pale. She dropped her eyes, but immediately she raised them again and regarded him steadily. Color poured into her cheeks. But her eyes did not fall.

He took her hand, pressed the fingers.

"Mary!" he whispered. "You care, — don't you?"

She nodded.

He sought both her hands and pressed them to his lips. "So lovely!" he murmured, "so good, so brave! You would never have said that, would you, Mary, about my being a minister? Would you, Mary?"

She only shook her head.

"And you would go with me wherever I go and help me with everything, wouldn't you, Mary?"

"Yes," she whispered.

There was a pause. Her breath was on his face.

"Mary!"

"What?"

"Call me George — now! Say it!"

"George!"

He kissed her many times.

According to George's diary the love which began there in that little buggy in Sunken Hollow has never grown

cold. It lives to-day. It has met with joy and pain; it has gone through the fire of experience.

For that present time it went to change the regular run of conditions in Sunken Hollow, causing much high-hearted discussion and pleasant excitement among the people. Before long they saw their tall young minister stride up the aisle of his poor little church with Mary Meller, who was all flushed and pretty in her white wedding dress, going along bravely beside him. A thing like that was no daily occurrence to those staid farmers. They talked of it through many a later year.

CHAPTER V.

PROBLEMS.

"It's like a drop of water in a bucket," said George to his young wife, Mary.

She stood in one of the rooms of the parsonage of Sunken Hollow, dressed in a pretty slip-over apron, with bright roses in her hair. All morning they had been busy working and planning.

Small beads of perspiration glistened on his forehead. His coat was off, and the shirt-sleeves rolled up. This way and that, for hours, he had been moving the scant few things they owned. But in no position did they seem to fill those big rooms. There was simply not enough of furniture. A few wedding-gifts — from George's mother, from the Mellers, from Mrs. Stark, and one from the church — in addition to the few things George had been able to purchase, all these made no great impression in those immense vacant spaces.

"Yes, just like a drop in a bucket," George repeated again, and they both stood there and laughed about it.

"Well," she said at last, tossing up her hands in a care-free gesture, "everything that's to be, will be, George."

He sat down in the one soft chair they owned (the gift of the congregation) and looked at her. She faced him and smiled.

"Come here," he said. "I want to talk to my wife."

She came over to him.

"Look straight into my eyes, dear."

She did.

"Our courtship," he told her gravely, "was a series of inexpensive buggy-rides. Our honeymoon had to be spent in Bitter Point — of necessity. Our house hasn't even

half enough furniture. There you are! The struggle of a poor minister's life is already beginning. What do you think of it, Mary?"

For answer she leaned down and kissed him.

He held her close. "Oh, what am I talking about?" he murmured. "I'm the richest man in the land! What if I do lack some things, — a bit of metal or a few pieces of wood, — why, I've got everything!"

"And so have I," she acknowledged sweetly.

But then she jumped up. "There we are again," she said. "Making love when we're supposed to be putting this house in order. It's pretty, but not practical. Let's get busy."

"Right," he agreed, rising and surveying the scene again, rubbing his chin in perplexity. "Well, I'll simply have to make a visit to some second-hand man in the city. Will that table do now where it is, Sweet?"

"Yes, I think so." Her mind was already very busy. She could be practical. "We'll lock up all the up-stairs rooms and try to make the best of the down-stairs only," she decided suddenly.

"Why, yes. That's a good idea!"

"This side-room here can be your study. It won't interfere with the others. We can put all our new things in that front room. But, George, we really must have a rug there — we really must. Can't do without."

"All right. I'll borrow the money from Mr. Stark. That's settled."

He had mentioned that before about Mr. Stark.

"But I don't like borrowing," she said again, sitting down to think it over.

"I don't either. I've never borrowed before — even in college. But Mr. Stark offered to help us. We can pay it back next spring."

"If you once start to borrow anything —"

"This will be the only time, dear."

She agreed at last. They would have a rug at least. And, as it turned out presently, they would have other things, too, indispensable things, things that belong to a household, but that had simply been overlooked till now. It naturally increased that debt.

"It's a pity," George told his father-in-law some days later, "that we should have to start out with debts. But what can we do?"

"Nothing," smiled Mr. Meller. "Nothing, my boy. Don't even think about it. Pay it off as soon as you can and don't worry."

"The real truth is I shouldn't have married so soon," George half whispered. "But" — he looked cautiously about him — "that's Mary's fault."

Both laughed, and Mary called out of another room, "What's that he's saying about me?"

"Only fair truth," her father called back, and then he rose and slapped his son-in-law on the shoulder.

"George," he said, "I know a certain man who is very fortunate. He has youth, strength, intelligence, and a whole life ahead. He has a great work to do and a good wife to love and help him. He has everything. Do you know whom I mean, George?"

"I can guess," said George. "Now, if he were an optimist such as you —"

"Look at me," his father-in-law went on. "Thirty years I've taught the parish-school in Bitter Point. A happy life I've had. Successful work. A good wife. Nine children, all healthy, five of them happily married now. A full life. Always enough to eat. Plenty of blessings. Money —

well, why talk about it, George? I don't believe it's such a great blessing at all."

"No, but it's a great bother. We've found that out already."

"Don't let it be," was the advice.

Mary came in just then and told her father about their plans.

"We're using only the down-stairs. We don't need all that room anyway."

"No, not yet at least," George amended gravely and received a light slap of love for his remark.

They injected much humor into all their problems. After all, they were small problems — furnishing a house, rather, trying to furnish one. He said it, and she admitted it. Life had far greater problems than these, Mr. Meller added.

She had a wonderful surprise for George that first week. One evening she took him into the room which she had said was to be his study and let him look around in amazement and surprise.

"I was only waiting for them to be hauled," she explained softly, her eyes shining with the excitement she could not hide.

And how George's eyes opened! Two bookcases, big fellows, one to each wall. Plain bookcases, very plain, but very roomy, and all his books stacked neatly therein.

"Why," he said, "why, Mary! Mary, you wonderful girl! You considerate little wife!"

"A man in our church made them," she ran on, the words stumbling one over another. "And I painted them myself. And yesterday, while you were gone, they brought them over on a wagon."

George was overwhelmed. "But when," he asked, "when did you paint them, Mary?"

"Before we were married," she admitted, and he put his arms about her and told her again what a wonderful wife he possessed.

"But for you," he whispered, "my library would be on the floor in nice long, dusty rows."

"Well," she said, "I didn't want you to get a crooked back, stooping over for your books every day. I'm so proud of my husband's straight figure, you see. And next we'll get you a desk. You must have a desk. You can't study at the table."

"We could do without that for just a while," he suggested.

"No, we can't, George. Every minister needs a desk. And every minister's wife knows that."

"You darling!" he exclaimed. "Always thinking of your husband, aren't you?"

"No indeed," was the answer. "I'm thinking of myself just now. I certainly don't want you at my only table with all your books and papers when I'm busy with the household. I love you, but times will come when I don't want you around."

It was real adventure to furnish that house. Long evenings they would sit and talk and think about it.

"We'll get there," he philosophized. "Little by little, bit by bit. Nothing good was ever done in a great hurry."

"I'm going to keep a little book," she told him, changing the subject slightly, "a little book with all our accounts in it. Every month when your salary comes, we're going to put just so much aside to pay off those old debts of yours. And all our expenses will be listed. You understand, George, don't you? We'll try to live within our means, no matter how small they may be. It's the only way."

"You wise little woman," he said. "A budget, that's what you call it. Don't forget to leave something for the

coal bill this coming winter. And a miscellaneous fund for emergencies. Yes, if it wouldn't be for the emergencies, — the things that come up," — he stopped, thinking.

"Yes, I know," she said, thinking deeply herself. "It's really a big problem to make this little money we get reach, George, isn't it? I know how it was at home with mother."

It was the first time they had discussed their small income. They forgot it and went back to work. He always helped her with everything. From the first day of their married life he had included in his daily schedule the solemn duty of being of some help to his helpmeet.

And when he helped, he adopted the only correct method. He listened to all her suggestions and refrained from making many himself.

Mary recognized this fine, thoughtful attitude and loved him deeply for it. By her actions she called him lord and master. And he loved her for that. They were perfectly matched, George and Mary. Mrs. Stark, her eyes always misty when she spoke of them, said, "Just like pigeons, them two. Never a loud note in their cooing."

Those first few weeks and months of married life were beyond comparison. It changed that desolate, empty parsonage into a place full of light and joy despite all the things it still lacked. Mary sang daily as she worked. And George was as happy as he was successful in his work.

That fall he started a parish-school, daily teaching some thirty children.

Almost daily he made visits to his church-members, driving the decrepit mare of John Stark's which had hauled him from the station at his coming to Sunken Hollow. The congregation had promised him a healthy horse and a passable buggy for his own use immediately after the harvest season. To spare a good horse during the busy

time on the fields seemed impractical, if not altogether foolish.

In every way he tried to make good use of his leisure time. To the side of the parsonage he cleared space for a garden. To the rear of the garden he built a fairly acceptable hen-coop, and with the help of several of the younger farmers of his church a stable went up also, which was to house his prospective horse and cow.

He, the boy from the city, had soon proved a marvel to the farmers. John Stark said one day to his wife, "Say, if I didn't know that our preacher was born and raised in a town, nobody could ever make me believe it. He's even thinking of keeping pigs now. Just imagine! I'd like to see what he'd do with a four-hundred-pound snorter."

"Well," came back his wife rather tersely, "if I didn't know how little a salary our preacher was getting, nobody could make me believe it. Think that over, John! If that man wouldn't be the way he is, he could starve with his wife. It's a shame, too. Our old Swede, Axel, he gets more than our minister if you figure it out right with the board and everything."

"Well," argued John, "the congregation is doing the best it can right now. Later maybe —"

"Ah, fush!" she cried. "The best it can! Our congregation has been paying the same for the last fifteen years. And there's none of the members that couldn't give up the farm right now and live on what they got, — and you know it. Don't you tell me anything!"

"I won't," he promised. "It wouldn't be no use anyhow to try to tell you anything."

"You know it wouldn't," she said, "especially not if it's such silly batter. Listen — look at that present our church gave the minister for his wedding — one chair!

Oh me, oh my! One chair! What a shame! Oh, what a dirty shame!"

"Well, but it was a big chair, with a leather seat — the best chair he's got in the house right now. They both sit in it, those two."

"I said it's a shame, and it is a low-down, rotten one!" she cried. "One chair! I tell you I wouldn't have nothing to do with that shabby present. That's why I got them dishes. They got plenty of dishes at least." She shook her finger. "And I'll tell you something — I ordered a desk, too, for him —"

"What!" shouted John Stark, "you ordered a desk! You paid for it?"

"Yes, I did — and with my own chicken-money," she replied. "And now you get out and milk those cows! Don't you hear 'em howling their heads off?"

"Well," he said after a few moments, "I was going to say, you and me, we didn't treat the minister so bad, really. I offered to borrow him some money, and he did borrow a hundred dollars off me —"

She interrupted him suddenly by raising her hands and staring at him open-mouthed. Then going over, she grasped his shoulders in a grenadier's grip.

"And you gave it to him? Did you, John?"

He looked at her doubtfully.

"Of course I did. I said I offered it first, didn't I? He didn't want it at all; he's not that kind that goes around and borrows money from anybody. But what can he do? He ain't got nothing."

She still looked at him as though she couldn't trust her eyes and ears.

"John," she said, touched beyond measure, "here's a kiss for your wrinkled-up old face. I'm proud of you." And

in a moment all the tenderness vanished. "But you listen, John. You keep your mouth shut — about borrowing the Revner that money. You hear!" She shook him. "It's nobody's business but his and yours. You hear that, John!" She pointed a warning finger.

"Don't go pointing no finger at me," he objected, dodging the finger as though it might have been a shotgun. "I hear you all right. I don't tell things. I'm no old woman."

"All right," she said, drawing breath. "Get out and milk those cows. And God bless you, my dear, dear man! Why, I didn't think you had it in you."

CHAPTER VI.

THE FIRST BIG BLESSING.

A little narrow path winding its way from the hill on which stood the parsonage of Sunken Hollow skirted John Stark's golden corn-field and ended in the thick, dark woods beyond.

Often George and Mary gladly followed whither it beckoned that fall. The pleasure of it was matchless — from the heat of the autumn sun with its blinding yellow light into the coolness of century-old trees with their soft, wavering shadows. "Sanctuary," George liked to call it. Hushed, except for the easy murmur of leaves now and then; dark but for the moving patches of brightness that pierced through gaps in the green overhead. There they would sit, the young minister and his wife, and see the present in fact and the future in fancy.

To have dreams is the privilege of every human being. It is in the manner of dreaming where humans differ widely. George's dreams were not elaborate; they could not be. Neither were Mary's, for she was his loyal wife. Their dreams were only modest wishes, little silent prayers, so to speak, for the continued happiness of two married people. All that was and all that was to come they contemplated with the eager, hopeful eyes of youth. Their dreams were unselfish, sincere ones.

And already there was the certain prospect of substance in them. In less time than another year their first blessing was to be. Mary whispered the news to George on one of those bright days under the shady trees. He listened, startled, amazed, and then his heart sang, and he laughed with sudden impulsive happiness.

"There'll be three of us, Mary," he cried, embracing her tenderly.

With the decline of fall that trip into the forest lost a little of its charm. Melancholy set in; green leaves withered and died and fluttered to the ground. Sharp winds whistled through the bare branches. The snows of winter were not far off. Already they announced themselves in thin little flurries that did not last, but were harbingers of great blizzards that were to follow. Sunken Hollow had some terrible winters.

Mary, too, suffered from little periods of depression. It was going to prove a problem to heat the old building. Not a window frame in it fitted tightly, not a down-stairs room could be closed off to gather and conserve the warmth. Standing on a hill as it did, the house would offer its full face to the iciest of blasts. Mary considered that with anxious expectations.

"Well," said George cheerfully, "we'll not try to save anything on coal. We'll keep warm, and if we have to put a stove into every room. And I'll keep the fire overnight in cold weather. And don't you worry, Mary, about anything. It's not right to worry, and besides, it does no good, only harm."

"I know. I'm not worrying, George." And she smiled to reassure him. "Only thinking."

"Well, don't even do any thinking — just now," he suggested with a soft laugh. You be merry just as I am. Let me do all the thinking."

That did make her laugh. He was happy to see it.

It seemed that this first winter desired to show its strength very early, just to teach George Willing not to be quite so optimistic about his Sunken Hollow winter weather.

Already in the second week of December it began showing its white, frosty teeth, and it bit down hard until Christmas. George fed his three stoves with a will; but notwithstanding the great amount of fuel he used, there was no effective way of combating the chill entirely that invaded the house from under its foundation and through every loose window.

"Whew!" he said, beginning to stuff the windows with paper. "It's certainly North Pole weather. Let's try to remember this for next summer when we complain so much about the heat. Are you keeping yourself warm enough, Mary?"

She shrugged and smiled. "Well, if it only wouldn't be for this cold floor — my feet are always like ice."

"I've tried my best to remedy that," George confessed seriously. "It can't be helped. If we could only put a stove in the cellar!"

She laughed. He always tried to say things to make her laugh. "Yes, you would put up more stoves," she told him. "What we really do need is another house. This one simply can't be heated."

He caught the first little sound of impatience in her voice, he thought. A minute later she was smiling bravely again.

Their first Christmas was very cold, but also very bright. George made big tracks through the snow in quest of an evergreen-tree, while she stood at the window with a heavy shawl about her shoulders and watched him. When he returned with a small cedar a half-hour later and they began to set it up and decorate it, Mary laughed many times just as she had laughed in the Christmas-days of her childhood.

And that evening, as they sat about the lighted candles together with Mary's parents and some of her sisters and

brothers, George said that he only wished his mother could be there too.

Later, when the company had gone, he mentioned it again.

"You know, mother isn't strong. She's worked so hard in her life. I want her to come."

"Why don't you send for her?" she urged. "I'll be only too glad to have her with us. She's so sweet and good."

"Well," he said, "I've invited her ever so often, but she won't come. She won't come until — she has to. That's like mother."

But, after all, his mother came sooner than he had thought she would.

The cold weather lasted into January, then it softened for a week or two. But February proved worse than ever. Zero temperature, relentless as a vise. As a result of it Mary took sick just when George felt that the worst of the winter was over. His first anxieties and troubles began. Mary, lying in bed, seemed weak and depressed.

Mrs. Stark, who came daily, suggested to call a doctor.

She mustn't get sick you know — not now," she whispered to George. "I tell you, send for old Doctor Hartman. He knows her so well. And" — here she winked — "he'll be good to you, too."

Old Doctor Hartman came and said to Mary, feeling her pulse and looking over his glasses, "A little cold, no more. Stay in bed, where it's nice and warm. That's all. And if you get out on your feet before next week, lady, I'll come here and spank you."

To George he whispered privately, later, "*Brr!* This is still the same identical house — this old ice-box. I've been in here every year almost for twenty years. The good church surely doesn't spoil its minister, does it? Nothing can spoil — on ice, you know."

"I've got three stoves going," George told him, hardly appreciating that last remark.

"You could put up three more," was the answer, "and burn still more coal. And they wouldn't pay you a cent more. I know it! Now about your wife — make her rest." He frowned. "She's not such a strong woman, you know."

At that George drew a sudden breath. "No?" he asked. "Why, she always looked good."

"But she is weak and nervous," said the doctor, waving his hand. "And just now — of course, you know her condition?"

"Yes, of course."

"Well, now, when she gets out of bed, you make her sit down and do as little as possible. If you could get, say, a girl to help."

"A girl? Certainly." George considered rather aimlessly, and a light suddenly broke. "Oh, I'll get my mother to come. She'll come."

"Fine! That's better than a girl. — Well, then, that's all." The doctor picked up his hat.

"And what do I owe you?" asked George.

"Nothing at all, Pastor. Well, a handshake, maybe. There!" He extended his hand amiably.

"But," George began, but he was cut off by a toss of the bald head and a slow smile. Little Doctor Hartman came close to him and gazed squarely into his face.

"Look at me, Pastor. I'm a pretty old fellow; been here a long time. I know these parts and these people. I took care of your predecessor's medical wants. I know that a minister can't really pay his doctor bills. So I don't give him any to pay. And that's not his fault either nor mine."

"But I can pay," George objected with dignity. "And you drove twelve miles to come here."

"It's all right. I'm not a church-member, Pastor, but I know just what the church gives you. They've been paying that for the last twenty years. And they'll never pay any more. They're prudent with their money, to say it gently." He turned aside and laughed. "An earthquake, a cyclone, or even the end of the world, I guess, couldn't shake it out of their pockets."

George was slightly embarrassed. He felt that he must defend his people. They were being maligned.

"Well," he said, grasping at his first thought, "it's in their flow, so to speak, to be economical."

"Economical! Ha! You can call it that."

"And then, they must be told their mistakes. We all have our faults. They simply don't realize —"

"They've been told ever so often by your predecessor. I happen to know that. I was his doctor, you know. He was in bad shape at last. Worry and all kinds of aggravation, you know." He shook his head. "No, Pastor, here in the country things don't change much, at least for a minister. — Well, I'll have to be going. Take good care of that little wife of yours. She's a fine jewel, Pastor. I know her since babyhood. In fact, I was the first to greet her in this world. Fine man, her father. 'Way too fine for that Bitter Point. He's one, too, who's being paid about one-tenth of what a normal man really needs." He went toward the door, but turned and came back once more. "You know I admire ministers and teachers. They can work hard, get next to nothing for it, remain as poor as mice, even suffer, and all the while keep from flying off and telling their people what they must think of them. Well, good-by, Pastor."

At the window George stood a while watching him drive away in his old buggy. Then he went into Mary's room and sat down at her side. He looked a bit thoughtful.

The doctor thinks that you'll be well in a few days," he told her cheerfully. "A good doctor, no doubt, but I'm afraid, Mary, he's an awful gossip."

"He always talked so much," she said. "Papa never liked it, but he never charged us anything, so that's probably why we always had him. He's really a good old fellow, George. You have to understand him. Did he charge you anything?" she asked, looking up.

"No." George leaned back and looked at the ceiling. "But I'd rather pay than listen to all those things he said about our people. They at least go to church. It seems he never does."

"No," she admitted. "He never did."

The next day when Mrs. Stark came, she asked at once if the doctor had been there. And when George merely nodded, she enlarged on her former remarks concerning Dr. Hartman. "He talks a lot, but he tells a lot of truth, too. He ain't afraid to say what he thinks, if you like it or not. Old Weissman, one time, he nearly threw him out of the house, but of course he was in bed and couldn't, you see." She began to sputter. "You know what he told Old Weissman? He told him he was letting the money get so rusty in his pocket that it was affecting his mind. Ha! That was something for that stubborn old miser!"

George's mother came in the beginning of March. She hadn't been able to say no on reading her son's letter.

"Mother, now Mary is sick," he had written. "If something should happen to her, I don't know what I'd do. You've got to come now, Mother. Don't worry about how we'll get along. Just come. I'm sending you as much money as I could scrape together. Buy a ticket as soon as you can, but not a return ticket, because you're going to stay right here. . . ."

When she came to Sunken Hollow, Mary was well again.

"George," Mrs. Willing told her son in a private moment, "I want you always to be frank with me. I know what a burden it will be to carry along an old woman."

"You're not an old woman, Mother. Don't say it."

"Sometimes — I feel much older than my years."

"That's because you still worked when I didn't want you to," he replied. "From now on you'll be with us, and no more work for you. Cheer up, Mother. You are a little pale now, but here in the country you'll blossom again like a fresh flower."

"Yes," she sighed, "I'll try to at least, George. And I'll try to be a good help to Mary. But old flowers, my boy, don't blossom so easy, especially when they're weak at the roots." She shook her head.

But he broke out into laughter. "What a philosopher!" he cried. "If you're not checked, you'll ramble on." And he checked her with a boyish kiss. "You and I, Mother," he quoted, out of days that were past.

"Yes," she smiled. "You and I. It's like old times, George. But it isn't true any longer. There's Mary now, and soon there'll be — little George. We're getting to be a crowd."

"We're all one," George said.

In the days when the promise of warm summer filled the air, the baby arrived. It was a specific case, this birth, that baffled and scared experienced old Doctor Hartman. In the evening Mary lay as white as death, suffering. George, sitting at her side, bore mental tortures of his own.

Another doctor had to be called, a specialist. Doctor Hartman set out to drive forty-three miles through the night to get him from the city. George offered to accompany him.

"No," the old doctor said, shaking his head. "You stay here — with her. She'll need you. Talk to her — of other things."

And she did need him. That long wait for the doctor from the city! Mary would not speak. At last George paced the floor, struggling to keep a grip on himself. His mother sat at the other side of the bed, white-faced, but patient and quiet, stroking Mary's head. Her parents had come, too, and one of the older sisters. The room seemed crowded.

Time after time George went to the window and stared out into the night. Turning back, he would see nothing but Mary's pale face and the signs of intense suffering in it. Into his study he went at last and prayed. Old Teacher Meller followed him and gripped his shoulder silently. When they came back into the sick-room, the doctor was there.

All anxieties passed that night, and dawn brought light and joy. Mary spoke again presently, very faintly, of course, but she spoke. And George kissed her and stroked her hands. He took his first little son and put him into the cradle he had purchased only some weeks before. As he watched the tight little fist waving above the pink cover, he looked like a very proud father.

He was a healthy baby, little Georgie. It was established at once by all present that he possessed his mother's brown eyes. For his original birthday he received many a gift from friends, relatives, and members of his father's church, which, by the way, was a very fortunate thing for his parents.

"Oh, he's worth a hundred dollars," said George happily some weeks later to Mary as he bounced the little fellow very gently on his hand.

He was not even thinking just then that the specialist from the city had charged only half that much for him.

"Just look, Mary. If those aren't your eyes, then I'm color-blind. Brown as two chestnuts. What do you say, Mother?"

"They're Mary's eyes," George's mother agreed.

"You'd better not shake him so much, George," Mary cautioned.

"This is the sweet part of life," he said, holding him up high. "Look at him smile. No, sir, I won't take a million for him. Here he is, Mary; look at him. Our first big blessing."

CHAPTER VII.

SEVEN YEARS.

A minister's life is not smooth, and therefore it makes an interesting story. George Willing frowned often, but he smiled most of the time, and mostly his smiles meant something; for there are two kinds of smiles — when things go right and when things go wrong. The latter kind is the most difficult and worth while.

By nature he was cheerful. So was his wife. In this chapter we shall endeavor to bring the high points of their first seven years in Sunken Hollow, a period of both smoothness and stress, through which both came with faces smiling in the end.

That which he, because of his inherent modesty, did not write into his diary must be said here. His work as pastor during these years was greatly blessed by the Lord. The people of Sunken Hollow to a man loved him for what he gave to them and because of the deep sincerity with which he gave it. They did not tire saying how highly they appreciated his faithful and intelligent service. But that is all they did. During those seven years, true to tradition and Old Doctor Hartman's prediction, George's small salary had not been increased.

The lack of sufficient funds must never be deplored, but it is bound to have some significant bearing upon a man's life. In those seven years the pastor's family had grown to four children, needy little ones, who all required a separate place in the family budget. This, with other salient points, comprised a puzzle for Mary Willing, which she tried to solve as best she could. For Mary Willing, we say, because George had soon given it up, acknowledging complete failure, and put it all into his wife's hands.

She was a remarkable woman, a good wife and mother, and she almost proved equal to the task of maintaining a balance, — almost, but not quite. The only reason she failed slightly was because the whole matter was humanly impossible to do.

Fortunately there seemed to be no noticeable drain on her strength in those seven years of close apportioning and careful planning. She seemed to have become slightly fuller and much rosier than she had been at the beginning.

It was the emergencies, those "things that just come up," that proved to be the most bothersome contenders in her attempt for tranquillity in household management. And sickness was the most formidable of these.

Because of the cold parsonage, "that old ice-box," as Doctor Hartman called it, little Georgie took sick in the very first winter of his life. There came a very dark night for Mary and George when they sat together at the bedside uttering silent prayers, one after another, that their little one might not die.

Little George did not die. He got over it, but in years following his body always looked frail and seemed inclined to remain so.

"He's not like his father," Mary often said as she gazed at him, her eyes very wistful.

George never showed the pain he felt every time he looked at his thin little son, whose brown eyes were so like his mother's. It always stabbed him like a knife. He liked to imagine that Georgie would grow up to be tall and strong like himself and later on study to be a minister. His first-born another Pastor George Willing. It was a fond dream.

"Oh, he'll pick up," he told his wife. "I used to be a skinny little thing, too, when I was small. Look at me now!"

Daily he took the little fellow out for exercise and told him to breathe in deeply the fresh country air. Little George did that very obediently, but showed no noticeable improvement. His three little sisters — their names were Mary, Helen, and Ruthie — were all healthy and strong.

The other case of illness in the parsonage was George's mother, who had never been well since her coming to Sunken Hollow. Not wishing to cause trouble and worry for her son, she had long kept her own troubles locked tightly in her breast, hiding them under merry songs and smiles. But several times the insidious malady from which she suffered had put her down. Then George had seen how brave she was. Dr. Hartman told him privately that he had never seen a braver woman than his mother.

"I'm just a little in doubt as to her condition," he said seriously. "If we could only take her to the city for an examination —" he stopped there and waited for George to speak.

"Of course," George at once agreed. "We'll do that."

"Well, I've suggested it to her — several times. She'll not even hear of it. It will cause some expense, you know."

"I know, I know. That's like mother. Always giving, never taking. But she'll go. I'm going to see to that."

"Very well. I knew you would, Pastor Willing. But remember, the sooner, the better."

"Yes," George said. "I'll talk to her right now. And you come in and help me."

At first Mother Willing would hear of no such thing. They prevailed upon her at last by means of joint effort. Reluctantly, some days later, she allowed herself to be driven to the city for an examination. As a result of it she was taken almost immediately to a hospital to undergo a major operation. The operation seemed fairly successful. After weeks in the hospital she returned home to Sunken

Hollow. All of this happened in the course of a single month. But it swallowed up most of her savings of years and left her almost "penniless in her son's hands," as she often put it privately to herself.

Mary and the children to which she had given life really bloomed like wild flowers, as George was wont to say very often. Poor little Georgie, of course, was an exception, but his father always included especially him when he said it.

Those four children brightened up all things. Pastor George Willing's family life was a very happy one. He had long unlocked those empty up-stairs rooms in the parsonage and put in little wooden beds for his four little "sleepy-heads" to dream in. Mary's sewing-machine hummed daily, turning out clothes for four little growing bodies. George liked to take the measurements, just for fun, with his clumsy male hands, while his wife and his mother laughed at him and the little ones screamed with delight.

Four pairs of little feet tramped about those parsonage floors. Four little voices sang lustily about the house when George wanted to study his Sunday sermons. At first he had tiptoed up and closed the door, but he opened it again, finding that he could study better when he heard his children singing.

Four hungry little mouths to feed at the table three times a day and often between. George's vegetable garden proved a very essential thing and his chicken-yard an absolute necessity. Soup and eggs and home-baked bread. And milk. In his second year at Sunken Hollow George had made an initial payment on a cow, and it had taken him another year to pay it off entirely; but he had been heartily in favor of a cow ever since. All the work about the house and the yard kept him very much occupied in addition to his duties. His was a busy life, but he loved it.

His official duties became tasks in certain respects. Sometimes he had to admonish his farmers. Many of them were very evidently lovers and hoarders of earthly treasures. Whenever a drought came in summer, George was required to pray fervently for rain. In the fall they asked him to ask God that the cold might not set in till the whole harvest was safely gathered. All the special prayers they requested were indirectly concerned with their purses. It bothered George, who was very sincere. He certainly did not wish to sit in judgment over his parishioners. But one Sunday he preached a strong sermon on "Heavenly Treasures." It brought him a small storm of indignant reaction. Evidently a vulnerable spot had been touched.

The storm raged mostly under cover, but two of George's members, Old Weissman and Peters, led an open attack by a personal visit. They came to the parsonage of an evening.

"There's something," began Weissman, "we want to talk over with you, Pastor."

"Very well," said George, who guessed what that something was. "Sit down. Give me your hats. Please take off your coats, too. It's so warm. Let's be comfortable." And he smiled.

But they came right to the point. That sermon on heavenly treasures had been a trifle too sharp. It was not for Sunken Hollow. They had always been sincere in their going to church, had always looked first to the things of the kingdom of God. It had been completely unnecessary, that sermon. Such was their opinion and the opinion of many another member.

Back and forth they talked. A long discussion.

"I still fail to understand," George said to them at last, "where you got the idea that I was referring to Sunken Hollow at all. Did I mention Sunken Hollow?"

"No, you didn't," Peters admitted.

"Well, then, where in the world did you get the idea that I meant Sunken Hollow?"

"Well," said Weissman, scratching his old head, "you know, Pastor, —" and he stopped and smirked a bit significantly.

"You mean," prompted George, "that you *felt* that I meant Sunken Hollow. Is that it?"

"Yes! We could all feel that."

"Well, tell me, why did you feel that I meant Sunken Hollow since I didn't say it?"

Both paused and stared like two mice hesitating before an open trap. They were at a loss for an answer, so George supplied it, rising to his tall height.

"I'll tell you why you felt it was meant for you," he said, keeping very calm and gentle. "It's because you probably were in need of it. A sick man feels the need of medicine; and no man, you see, can fool himself, although sometimes he tries to fool about every one else, including his minister and even God. I'll be frank with you. In speaking of loving and hoarding money, I actually meant Sunken Hollow. I've been here over five years; I've got a fair amount of intelligence, and my eyes are not blind. I will not judge; I will point at no man, but I will preach, and he who will be upright with himself will listen to my words; and if they happen to fit his case, he will know it, and he will put on the shoe, regardless of how it may hurt, and pray God that he may change him — and leave his pastor alone."

There was a truly expressive pause after that. But when Weissman and Peters still wished to prolong the argument, with not a leg left to stand on, George became specific and practical.

"You gentlemen need to be shown examples," he told them. "Look at your church, the place you have used for

more than twenty years to seek the kingdom of heaven in. It's a barn. No repairs to speak of have been made since I came here. I have been in no private house in this whole congregation where things have been allowed to run down like here in our church. Is that putting the kingdom of God first? Our church is the most miserable building in this whole community." And for the moment he wanted to add hotly, "And the old parsonage is next in line," but fortunately he conquered himself and didn't. But he asked calmly, "What have you to say to that?"

They had much to say, but nothing that was quite sensible or to the point. Their whole purpose in coming, it turned out, was to reprove the minister for a supposed personal insult. George finally bade them go home and think carefully over the question of whether or not they hadn't insulted their pastor by coming as they did. It seemed that both found the correct answer to this question, for they never visited George on such a mission again.

There were other disagreeable incidents, too, and most of them found their chief reason in the "tight-fistedness" (Mrs. Stark's term, not George's) of the people of Sunken Hollow. In the matter of church contributions, for instance, there was no end of miserliness shown. George kept punishing it with sermons and noticed improvement in certain quarters, but growing stubbornness in others.

Old Dr. Hartman, on the occasion when George tried to make him see the necessity of becoming a Christian, gave him a very stiff argument concerning just this point.

"When I see, Pastor, what Christianity does to these folks that run to church, that's enough for me. The way they let your family freeze every winter, for instance. For seven years you froze, and you'll freeze seven more before they'll spend a cent to make you at least humanly comfortable. Look at what they pay you — not enough for

a family of sparrows to live on. Who paid the special doctors you had to have twice? You did. Why, you have to be a farmer, a chicken-raiser, a cow- and pig-keeper, in order to eke out an existence. No, no! Is that Christianity?"

"No," George answered at once. "No, it isn't true Christianity, Dr. Hartman. Did I ever say it was?"

"But they all run to church every Sunday."

"Yes. But not in order to become greater misers than they are. You put it all wrong. Christianity does not do this to these folks. The Evil Spirit does it, the devil, whom Christianity fights against."

"Humph! It surely looks like a losing battle, Pastor."

"It is, very often. But is that a reason to give up the battle, to throw away the sword, to surrender? Haven't you ever heard and read, Dr. Hartman, that even a persistent loser can become a winner? That's the reason the church stands there, and that's why I am here, and that's why these people go to church. We are fighting to win, not to surrender as soon as we feel our own weakness or hear somebody mocking us."

"Well, these people have been fighting a long time, and I never saw any results."

"Naturally you didn't." George laughed. "As a doctor you can look into their throats and noses and ears, but not into their hearts. You can feel their pulse, but you can't feel their soul."

"What results are present inside should show on the outside."

"We're going around in a circle, Doctor. Sit down. Let me have your satchel. You're not so busy this morning, are you?"

The doctor hedged. "Well, — I've got something —"

"Well, sit down a few minutes only. Let me diagnose

your case. You need a little tonic for the most important part of you, your soul. It's in a run-down condition."

In spite of himself Dr. Hartman laughed and sat down. "Well, go ahead," he said.

"Now," said George, "you're quite experienced where it concerns the life of a person. He's born, he grows up, with the seed of illness and death already in him; in time he gets weak, and he dies. If we were speaking of a plant or a tree or an animal, we would say, 'That's the end.' But man, unlike other creatures, has two parts, body and soul. Plants, tree, animals, have only bodies. In that in which man is different from them, in spirit, in mentality, in understanding, therein lies the soul. Now, all creatures are the handiwork of God, but the soul is the very breath of God. Because it is, it never dies. So the death which a man dies is not the end of him, Dr. Hartman."

He paused a while, then drove on.

"There is a hereafter, a later life, a life with God in all eternity. Hearing the Word of God, the Law and the Gospel, is the means to attain this life. You think the church is there to make man good for the world. It is there to bring him to heaven. Now, the question is for you and every man, 'What must I do to get to heaven?' "

Again he paused. Dr. Hartman was following him closely.

"If man could be good, he could go to heaven on the strength of his goodness. But where is there a man that can be good and holy in the sight of God? Sin is in the world. You know that. It has great power over man. What man must do therefore is to hear and believe in God's Word, which tells him this: You are completely lost in sin. The only way for you to come to God is to accept Jesus, who has taken your sins away by shedding His blood for you and thus has gained heaven for you. All you need

do is to accept Jesus by faith, by believing that He has made you righteous before God; and this faith in Him comes by going to church and hearing what He says in the Gospel."

"Now listen," interrupted the doctor, pointing his finger, "you mean to say that these people can stay as stingy as they are and still have faith and go to heaven?"

"I mean to say," George answered, "that all men have their sins and weaknesses and will always have them and that this is the very reason why they need the mercy of Jesus Christ, which is given every Sunday in church. Sin is a sickness, mercy is the medicine. If these people had no sin, they would need no mercy, no church. Compare it with your own case, Doctor. Since you have no sin, since you are good, you don't need any church."

They smiled slowly at each other after that last remark. The doctor rose then and took up his satchel.

"Well," he said, "I'll have to be going. Sometime I'll hear some more, Pastor."

"That's right," George said smiling. "Faith comes by hearing."

There were other doubters also to whom George told the truth, honestly and sincerely. He was a persistent missionary. It could not be said of him that he feared mockery. "Mockery, after all, is the form of cheer an unbeliever seeks for his cheerless conscience," he would say. "Men who deny God are as cowardly and as foolish as the ostrich, who, sticking his small head into the sand and closing his eyes, imagines that he is perfectly safe from imminent danger."

"He'll tell you that one about the ostrich," these doubters said of him often, laughing. But every one also admitted, "He certainly believes himself what he preaches."

Whenever he stood at death-beds during those seven

years, George was permitted to see the glorious fruits of his difficult work. Every such instance was a source of new power to him. Life is so full of important things, but the most important thing, after all, is that moment when life meets death, when a man lies powerless on his back, with the last vestige of his strength gone and a vast darkness gathering thickly before his open eyes. Then doubt means despair, and faith means everything. So frequently George saw that saving faith on the faces of dying people who had sat before him in those yellow wooden pews of the Sunken Hollow church and had listened so many times to his words.

He never left such a scene with a low spirit, even though death had occurred there. His soul was thrilled with a depth of great happiness and satisfaction, and he said in his heart, "I am glad, glad! A man is happy only when he can give things to another man. Some can give food, some clothes, some money, some amusement, some medicine — all to ease the inevitable bitterness that is in every man's life. But I, by the grace of God, am allowed to give that which can ease the greatest bitterness of all and make him meet the end bravely and with a triumphant smile."

Closely considered, they went by fast, those seven years. Time rode on swift pinions because there was always plenty of work and, if not work, plenty of pleasure.

It was high fun, for instance, in the early mornings of summer to go out with the children to the river and sit in the shade of the trees that lined it with a long fishing-pole in one hand and catch fish. Very quietly the children would have to sit and watch until round ripples in the still water would indicate a bite on the hook. Then there was pandemonium until the wriggling carp was subdued and strung on a line. Bullheads were always disdainfully thrown back into the water. Sometimes there was a trout, accompanied by many cheers. Once George caught a big fellow that

made Mary's eyes open. That fish furnished an entire dinner for the family.

The cool forest behind the parsonage was a favorite retreat on hot summer afternoons. In those same shady nooks where George and Mary had once sat as hopeful newly-weds they now sat with their four children. Mother Willing would sometimes be along, but not too often. Her walking was slow, and she preferred, she said, to stay at home with her knitting. She was really brave and wise, many times leaving her children and their children to themselves. And never did she meddle in their affairs.

In the woods, George played like a boy with his children, while Mary sewed and read. He taught them songs and games. Best of all they liked a little skipping procedure, romping along by twos, arm in arm, and singing a jolly song, — "Hippy Hop," they called it.

"Well, what shall we play?" George would ask of little Ruthie, bending far down and looking into her eyes.

She would laugh, and invariably her answer would be, "Play Hippy Hop."

And away they would go, the four of them, singing and dancing. It kept their father young and cheerful to tear about like that, and it scattered the thoughts of his studious mind. The truth was that he really enjoyed it as much as they did. In some moments his clerical dignity went flying.

But the happiest time of all was at Christmas. When the snow of winter lay white and deep, they would go, the whole family, in search of a tree. Those woods were full of evergreens — fragrant pines, and small, short-needled cedars. They could have their choice. When one of perfect shape was spotted, George applied the ax. Under his strong arms the chips would fly into the snow. And the children would laugh, and pick them up, one by one, and sniff at them, and say, "*Ooh!* It smells like Christmas."

And the bringing home of the tree was like a triumphal procession. Deep into the fluffy white their feet would sink, leaving black holes, little ones and big ones. Little Georgie, trying to follow his father's No. 10 tracks, would tumble all over himself, while his chubby sisters would pelt him with snow. George carried the tree on his shoulder. Mary sang Christmas-songs, and the children sang along with their piping little voices. They knew them all.

Brrr! Biting cold weather, the blinding white gleam of snow everywhere, clouds of breath in the air, and the gray sky with its thin spiral of smoke rising up from the good house on the hill that promised at least reasonable warmth and comfort. It was hilarious fun to make snowballs and then roll them until they grew so big and heavy that even George could not budge them.

And the snow man! Not one only did they build, but several, which stood around like vigilant sentries, guarding the parsonage with fence pickets and big, black coals for eyes. One winter little Ruthie, to make fun, innocently placed her father's best hat on one of them, where it stayed all night and froze tight before George or Mary noticed it.

But George only laughed at it the next morning and said, "She just wanted him to be a minister, I guess."

And Mary added, laughing, "She doesn't understand our budget system, George. She didn't know that according to my careful plans that hat was supposed to serve just four years more."

Both screamed. They made fun of these things. The fact was that all of George's clothes, and Mary's, too, had to be put to very severe endurance tests.

Almost we forgot to tell of the wonderful Christmas evenings, during those years.

There was the tree, in the middle of the room, reaching up to the ceiling, filled with colored balls and cookies and

fruits, and burning with many candles. A grand sight in itself. But all around it were toys, and candies, and nuts, and useful things to read and to wear, clothes, shoes, and many other things. It was true, many of the toys and things had to be last year's, simply done over or disguised effectively in some way, for the Willings could not afford much in absolutely new form. But everything went only to add to the great joy that almost burst the full hearts and bubbled over in the faces.

From the Bible George would read the beautiful story of Christmas while all would listen in a hushed silence: —

"For God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son. . . . Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior. . . ."

And the children would sing: —

Away in a manger, no crib for His bed,
The little Lord Jesus lay down His sweet head.

Far into the morning they would stay around the gleaming tree, reluctant to leave it, clinging to all that wonderful happiness till sleep made their eyes heavy, and the children would drop off, one after another, to be carried to bed.

Those were times to be printed indelibly into the memory, to last, as never-fading pictures, for all years to come.

Every day, except during the much-needed vacation periods, George taught his parish-school. In those seven years he had improved the school to such an extent that it was a well-known institution in that rural community. A number of children, not of his church, traveled many miles daily by means of horse and buggy to benefit by his instruction. They benefited in two ways, in secular and spiritual knowledge. No teacher could have been better loved than he, because he loved them first and understood them completely. Seven classes of children he confirmed in

those seven years, a total of over eighty new members for his church. The results of his work in this respect can still be felt to-day by fathers and mothers and even grandparents, who have given him a fond place in their memory.

He was always looking forward to the time when his own little ones would be in his classes. In respect to his one son his mind was firmly set — he should some day be a minister. Georgie's grandmother wished it, too, and his mother. The boy's physical weakness could be overcome. He was very intelligent and well behaved. And he had a willing spirit. That, after all, was the main thing.

In every matter of life and work, George used the wisdom he had and left the rest to his Father above, as every Christian, not only every minister, should do. When something failed to turn out as expected, he did not complain or brood. When things did turn out favorably, he did not forget to be thankful. So, with all the disagreeable matters that occurred, and with all the frowns that he frowned, and the sighs that he heaved, the course of those seven years was, in the final analysis, a fairly smooth and highly productive one.

In his diary he has modestly called it a "moderately successful period."

CHAPTER VIII.

TWO MIGHTY BLOWS.

That day in late November of the eighth year was just another day.

It began with sunshine and warmth, a pleasant change from a week of unpleasant chilly weather. George did his daily studying in the morning, for he had a pleasant idea of how to spend the afternoon.

"When dinner is over," he told his children, "we're going to take a long walk to our favorite place in the woods. It may be our last chance this year."

"Oh," cried little Georgie at once, "I like to go walking."

And Mary supplemented, "With my papa in the woods, I do."

And Helen and Ruthie pattered something indistinctly about playing games and singing songs in the shade.

In the kitchen, where Mary was cooking the dinner, George asked her, "Aren't you coming, too?"

She shook her head and whispered, "No, I'd better not. I'd better stay at home — with your mother."

Suddenly serious, he whispered back, "Why, what's the matter? She didn't say anything — lately."

"No, she never does, George."

"Well, what is it?"

Mary hesitated while he waited. She sighed and gave up suddenly and told him. "She didn't want me to tell you, George. It's that same old trouble."

He stood motionless. "You don't mean —"

"Yes. That operation did nothing for her, I'm sure. It was useless. The doctors in the city should have told us that."

There was silence. In the iron pot on the kitchen-stove the soup boiled merrily. It was hot in the room. George sat down and passed a hand over his forehead a bit wearily.

Mary said nothing. She was slicing bread, and her eyes were serious. She reached for the salt and strewed a pinch of it in the soup. George simply watched her.

At length Mary spoke. "These things, they just can't be changed, dear. Of course, it's not any worse than before, but it's there. I was in hopes, you know, that she was cured."

"I guess," he said dully, "we'll not go this afternoon to the woods."

"Oh, yes, you will," she told him. "You must, George! Take the children out. They're looking forward to it."

He sat there, silent. He watched his wife pour the boiling water from the potatoes and put them into the dish for the table. He saw her put the coffee on to boil and bring milk and butter up from the cool cellar. All these things, these ordinary things of daily life, went on, he thought vaguely to himself. And his mother, his good mother, despite all her quiet bravery and her patient smiles, was deathly sick. He knew that now. Like a dull blow it struck him as he sat motionless there on that kitchen-chair. Mary went about her work with her eyes swimming in tears. She knew how her husband loved his mother.

He had been so happy after that operation. Expense had been nothing to him. His mother had seemed entirely well.

Mary wished now that she hadn't told him. She should have kept the secret, as his mother wanted her to do. Now it was out. She blamed herself.

Presently he rose, his jaw set, and helped her with the table. While he was carrying dishes, his mother came down

the stairs, slowly, laboriously. In the kitchen Mary heard George greet her.

"Why, hello, Mother," he called out cheerfully. "How's everything? Why, more than ever you look like a young girl!"

And at the table everybody was cheerful.

"Wonderful soup," George said. "Have another plate, Mother?"

But his mother declined, laughing, though it actually hurt her to laugh.

And Mary started a very pleasant subject.

"Mr. Stark brought us a ham. A fine ham. They butchered last week."

"Oh, such a ham!" put in little Georgie. "It must have been a giant pig."

"We could be raising giant pigs, too," remarked George, "if it wouldn't be for Mr. Stark. He said pigs were nothing for a pastor because they would grunt when he wanted to study."

All laughed at Mr. Stark's poor joke.

"Mrs. Stark gave Ruthie a dollar for her birthday," said Mother Willing. "Ruthie's going to get a nice blue dress. Aren't you, Ruthie?"

"A nice boo dess," repeated Ruthie, with eyes as big and round as the napkin rings on the table.

"Yes," said Mary; "but then, Ruthie, you must learn to eat your soup right at last. You mustn't soil that blue dress when you get it. Look at Mary and Helen, Ruthie. They know how to eat their soup."

"And what of Georgie?" asked old Mother Willing tenderly.

"Oh, Georgie!" exclaimed his father. "He's the best soup-eater at this table. Why, look at him. He's an artist."

"I'm going to be a minister," said Georgie, "when I finish with school." His serious brown eyes sparkled.

"Right," agreed his father, reaching over to tap the thin little shoulder.

He was always urging the boy to eat more, and little Georgie was always trying his best to oblige. He ate two plates of soup and some potatoes. Coffee, much meat, or pickles he refused. His father had taught him that.

"I want to grow up," Georgie told them often, "to be big and strong like my father."

After dinner George took the children to the woods. But he did not seem as cheerful as at other times. Under a tree he sat, his face grave and tense with thought. To-day he would not join in with their games.

"Papa, please play Hippy Hop," little Ruthie enjoined many times.

"Georgie will play with you," he told her quietly. "Go now, Ruthie. Papa would like to think. Georgie knows well how to play the game."

Georgie did know. He ran about with his little sisters until his face was hot and his breath came in short gasps.

"We're having lots of fun," he called to his father.

"Not too much," George cautioned. "You're all out of breath. Sit down a while and rest — all of you."

They rested only a short period. Then they began again. George, thinking his thoughts, hardly noticed them. He paid no attention until they came to him, all out of breath, their faces flushed and streaming with moisture.

"Children, children!" he scolded. "That's too much. Now sit down. Or, better, we'll start back home. It looks like a storm."

So they began the home journey. Because they had gone deeply into the woods, it was a considerable trip. They

had not advanced far when the storm, which had gathered very quickly overhead, broke loose.

"Run," cried George, "we'll get wet."

He picked up little Ruthie, and the others followed him, running and panting. After only a few preliminary drops, the rain came down in torrents, drenching them to the skin.

It was a cold rain, the rain of a late autumn. When they arrived at the house, all wet alike, Mary began to scold in earnest.

"But why didn't you start earlier?" she accused George. "You must have seen the storm coming."

George acknowledged his guilt. "It was my fault," he said. "I was thinking."

"Oh, look how wet Georgie is!" She went to the boy, felt his clothes. "Why, what's the matter, Georgie?"

"I'm cold," Georgie said. His teeth were chattering.

"He must change right away," George said.

Mary compelled all of them to change clothes at once, completely from neck to toe. They did, but when all the rest felt warm and comfortable again, Georgie still complained that he was freezing.

His mother and father looked at him and felt his hands and forehead.

"He's got a chill," cried George, suddenly alarmed. "He was running around, and — we'd better put him to bed at once."

So little Georgie went to bed. More and more George became alarmed as he watched his son. They called Dr. Hartman that evening, and he pronounced it a touch of pneumonia.

"But don't worry," he told them, seeing their white faces. "I don't think it's serious. Of course, he must be kept warm and quiet."

He left them after giving directions. But in the middle of the night they called him again.

"It's serious now," George told him simply, his lips moving queerly.

After an examination Dr. Hartman gravely admitted it.

"We'll do everything we can," he promised George, who looked so absolutely tense and stricken at him.

Everything possible was done for Georgie. All was useless. The next evening Dr. Hartman took George into his own study and, standing at the window with his back to him, told him that Georgie would probably die that night.

He received no answer. When he turned, George was sitting slumped up in a chair with his head buried in his arms. Dr. Hartman usually could speak in instances such as these, say something in consolation. But this upset him. He had never seen George like this, George, who had always been so strong, so very much a man. Without a word he left that room.

Only a minute later George appeared in the sick-room where Mary sat at her son's bed. His face was white. He sat down and stroked Georgie's burning forehead with his hand. Georgie managed to smile at him despite his delirium and the many ideas that just then coursed through his feverish brain.

"I'm going to be a minister," he said to his father.

"Yes, yes," agreed George, smiling back. His voice was thick.

Little Ruthie came in that moment. She wished to see her brother. George lifted her, so that she might kiss him.

"Play Hippy Hop?" she said to Georgie.

"Not now," he answered. "When I get better."

At that Mary sank down and sobbed quietly. George rose and carried Ruthie away.

Then he returned and quietly told his little son the truth and was surprised to see how easily the boy received it. He prayed with him. After that Georgie had one more hour of peaceful earthly sleep. Then he died. All in a few days — the change that struck like a thunderbolt into the life and happiness of the parsonage.

What George and Mary suffered can better be imagined than described. All the relatives and friends who called that evening, and even old Teacher Meller, when he saw them standing so intensely white and tearless, seemed bereft of the strength to console them. It was the cup of bitterness filled to the brim.

George always remained at Mary's side, holding her with his strength. When he finally prevailed upon her to lie down, he went out alone into that cold, cheerless night and stood there in the darkness, motionless and bare-headed, with his soul swaying on the brink of despair. But he conquered.

"Lord," he prayed, "I know I can't have everything. I know how much I've been blessed and how little I've deserved all my happiness."

From out of that tragedy he drew strength, greater strength than he had ever possessed, and he imparted it to others in his sermons. Life, he said, with all it contains, happiness, sorrow, death, is the test for the soul of a man, and faith is the answer to every question. The lesson to be learned from every occurrence in life, sad or joyful, is the lesson of faith. Faith in God and in His Son is the goal of life; it is like a tower, supreme, beautiful, higher than all things, reaching up through time and earth into the eternity of heaven.

He was to suffer more, for little Georgie's death seemed to hasten the imminent end of Mother Willing. What little power she still possessed was blown out like a candle-

light when she saw the little fellow who had been the grandchild of her heart, carried to the grave. Two months later, in the middle of a severe winter, she broke down completely.

George did his utmost that her life might be prolonged. Because of his relentless insistence she submitted to another operation, which, as the doctors intimated, would probably be useless. But George wished it. She never returned from the hospital in the city. She was saved from the suffering which the malignant growth would have caused her had it run on.

"George," she told her son on the day of her death, "why, don't look so grave, boy. This is a time of happiness."

His lips moved. He looked into her shining eyes. "Mother," he said simply and smiled, for her sake.

"I've had a wonderful life," she went on, "and you made it wonderful for me. Oh, George, how proud I am, how proud I always was, of you! What a battle we fought, you and I, George! And we won, George, you and I. Don't you remember that, George, — you and I?"

"Yes, — you and I, Mother," he said, his steady eyes filling with tears at the reference to all those distant days he remembered so well in that moment.

"Now, George," she said, her weak hand going to his shoulder, her voice trembling. "You are a brave boy, a brave man. If I could stay with you, oh, how I would love to! But I can't. We all must go — to that better place. It's now — for me. You still have much work to do." She stopped. "I'm trying to be brave, George. — Help me."

He prayed with her then, as the light of life grew dim. He prayed in a strong, clear voice, holding her trembling hands in his steady ones.

She gave testimony of firm trust in the Savior, all that was needed for this moment. Just before she died, she told him faintly, "George, I'll be with little Georgie."

He broke down then; all of a sudden his fine bravery collapsed, and he cried like a child for a moment, while she died very quietly with her hand in his. When he recovered the grip on himself, her spirit had fled.

These two mighty blows George and his wife suffered during their eighth year in Sunken Hollow. Time healed the first pain gradually and showed them also the certain element of sweetness that is contained in every deep sorrow, a sweetness that can be really felt only by Christian people.

For those who die the book of life closes. If they die in faith, like little Georgie and his grandmother, we know that the book which next opens for them is a book of glory.

For those who still live the book of life is still open, and the pages turn daily, and are filled with more of life's experience, joy, bitterness, pain, — and scarcely much of glory.

CHAPTER IX.

A QUARTERLY MEETING.

In Sunken Hollow, George Willing had many sincere friends, but the best of them, no doubt, was old Mrs. Stark. While others gave him their admiration and their trust, she, as a real mother would do, went farther and studied his personal case from every angle.

And her husband, John Stark, was compelled to listen to all her deductions. Almost fifty years of experience with her had made him a good listener. He talked back much, but he knew just when the situation became too hot for safe interruption.

"Eight years now," she was saying, "our pastor has been here in Sunken Hollow. That's a long time, I tell you, for him to put up with people like us. And in those eight years did you ever hear him say a single word as to how he ain't satisfied with things, did you? No, you didn't; don't tell me you did! And her — that sweet little thing — did she ever say anything? No, she didn't! — Well!"

"Well!" he repeated, hesitating, with a doubtful look at her.

"Well!" she returned. "Well — what?"

"Well," he said, "maybe they are both all nice and satisfied then. How do you know?"

"Ah, fush! Satisfied! If we don't hear anything, maybe we could use our eyes and see and our brains to think, if we got any. And you can use a little of that good imagination you got when you sell a pair of pigs in town. What do you think, anyway? Eight years he gets the same tiny salary, and he's had plenty of ways to spend much more than that. Four children with little Georgie, who's dead

now, and the fifth is coming. — Oh, don't gawk at me; I know more than you think! — And troubles? They had to have special doctors from the city twice, and his mother's two operations and hospital bills and two funerals — oh me, oh my! — it's a shame! Who paid all that? He did, if it's all paid already, and I don't think it is."

"Well, they got along these eight years, didn't they? Other people have to make debts too."

"Other people use their savings when they get sick, don't they? They didn't have a cent saved; I know it. How could they? You can't squeeze blood out of a turnip. All through these troubles he had he has never asked for a cent more salary. And nobody thought about it because he didn't ask. Oh, he's too good a man for us black sinners!"

"Well, they had hard luck just now. He'll get on his feet again. He'll get it all paid off — just like he paid me off those hundred dollars. Little by little, you know. He's a smart man."

"Och! He's not smart enough to make something out of nothing." She pointed at him. "John Stark, you're starting to talk like Old Weissman, who's so tight he still wears his wedding coat to church, and it's busting through in thirteen places. What do you know about a minister's expenses? Sure a minister is smart; and he needs books, for instance, to get the smartness out of! Books don't grow on his tomato plants. They got expenses you don't dream about — the Willings have."

John Stark puffed a while at his corn-cob pipe. His wife's logic was irrefutable. So he fell back upon that old hackneyed excuse.

"Well, the times are just a little hard right now."

"Ow!" roared his wife, both hands raised. "You give me a pain! Every time when we should go down in our

pants and bring out some money, the times are hard. And every one in our church has got a pile of money saved up in the bank, and them that's the richest, — Weissman, Peters, Pillhaus, — they're the stingiest. And you'd be stingy yourself if it wasn't for your wife, who keeps you different; but I never get no thanks for that, and I don't care!"

"Yes," he said, knocking out his pipe, "you've been carrying plenty of things to eat over to the minister's house these years. You done your share, you did."

"If I didn't," she told him, "they'd been still worse off. Shame on you! Go soak your head in salt water. You're getting like Old Weissman, sure!"

"Well," he argued after a pause, "when those girls of his grow up, he'll have some help, too. Look at his wife. When she was Teacher Meller's daughter over in Bitter Point, she worked, and that helped the Meller family some."

"That's another thing!" she burst out. "The way Teacher Meller was treated over in Bitter Point all these years is a sin that hollers out loud to heaven. And it's him that gave all those people their education, showed them reading and writing and figuring so they shouldn't be dumbheads their whole life. And what did they give him? There ain't any of them that couldn't quit the farm right now and get along on their money. And he, he can't last fifteen years more, then he's broke down, and what has he got? Nothing! Not a cent saved. Oh, I know it."

"Well, but all the old preachers and the teachers get something from the church-support money, don't they, when they have to give up — a pension like?"

"Yes, that's what Old Weissman keeps singing about. What would Old Weissman do if he didn't have nothing but that little support money an old preacher gets? I tell

you he'd be running around like a rooster with his head chopped off, scratching and worrying for more."

So John Stark was finally convinced by his wife. He did his duty in the next quarterly meeting of the congregation. He began his remarks with the Biblical quotation concerning the ox that works hard for his master in treading out the corn and then receives as pay a muzzle for his mouth, so that he can't eat. He got the words mixed up a bit, but the meaning was there.

"A laborer," quoted John Stark, "is worthy of his hire. And that's what I say." He slapped his fist into his palm, and the whole voting body of the congregation sat up stiffly to see what was coming.

"Now, you all know that our good pastor has served us for eight years and raised a family, and he never said a word about the small pay he gets. And neither did we, but that's a shame. He's too good a man for us poor sinners!"

He paused, looking around rather fiercely to see the effect of his words. There was a hushed silence. Pastor George Willing, in the chairman's seat, suddenly looked entirely ill at ease. Old Weissman shoved a hand into his trousers' pocket and fingered a few nickels he had there. Peters produced a blue handkerchief and began mopping cold sweat from his forehead. Pillhaus sat up straight like a hound sensing the nearness of danger. Some few others nodded in agreement with John Stark's words, and some scowled as if rudely awakened out of a sweet sleep.

John Stark kept on: —

"I say we should open our eyes and see that we don't treat our pastor right. He works hard, but he can't save a cent. He ain't smart enough to make something out of nothing. You can't squeeze blood out of a turnip. Books don't grow on tomato plants. Business is business! I say" — and he used his fist again — "we should do something about it — now!"

Old Weissman cleared his throat, and his wrinkled finger went up. He was treasurer of the congregation. He opined that it was getting late and that there was no time to discuss this matter now and made a motion for immediate adjournment.

"*Ahrrr!*" snarled John Stark, stung to boiling anger. "He can go home, that mean old miser!"

John Stark was immediately called to order by the chairman.

Pillhaus rose. He said, "We'll have to talk this over first," and seconded Weissman's motion for adjournment.

Pastor Willing, rather relieved, prepared to ask the question, but John Stark had further remarks. His eyes glittered, and storm-clouds raged upon his brow. He delivered a four-minute lecture that seared and burned. He stirred up plenty of thick trouble. And he convinced many that now was the time to discuss the thing. After that he asked for the question regarding adjournment to be called, and it was voted down; and triumphantly John Stark seated himself, the spirit of his wife still effervescing within him.

"So," he said with a hostile glance at Weissman, "now we can talk."

And they did talk. It was an ordeal for George Willing, who loved peace above everything and worried very little about money. He suffered almost all things that were said, but only once or twice he rose to set some misguided spirit aright. Several times his anger bubbled a little, for he was only human.

Peters, making a devotional face, said that as far as he knew, ministers were servants of the Lord and should not even think of such a thing as money. All their thoughts should be concerned with the souls of the people.

To that John Stark answered: "When did our pastor

ever think or say anything of money? Tell me that! Prove it! Ha! So, what you said don't mean a thing."

One of the younger members agreed that it was clear to every one who laid claim to an ounce of sense that Pastor Willing was not able to save anything on his salary and that it should be certainly raised; but he made no motion to the effect. Others nodded; but they, too, failed to make a motion.

Then Old Weissman rose and delivered a lecture on economy and thrift. "Saving," he said, "is something you just have to learn. No matter how little you make, something always has to be put by for a rainy day. If you don't make much, you can't spend much. You have to live in accordance with your income."

For instance — just a few little things at random. A pastor in the country wasn't really required to dress like a fine gentleman. Not necessary. A wife's business was to keep house rather than to dress in such a becoming way as to fill other women in the congregation with envy. Children didn't need a toy apiece. They could go barefooted on Sunday as well as on other days. Then there were other things. Just for instance, it was shameful extravagance to chop a hen's head off just because it was Christmas. That hen could eat the grass which grew around everywhere for nothing and lay eggs, which could well be eaten. All that and more belonged to the fine art of saving.

But when he added that he himself had not bought a new suit in twenty years and that his wife had worn the same winter hat for twelve years, George's measure of patience was full. He rose, and though he contained himself very nicely, his voice snapped here and there under the strain of an intense inward fury.

"I fail to understand," he began bitterly on a sudden

uncontrollable impulse, "what I have done in these eight years to deserve all this censure."

The next moment he wished he could recall that remark, realizing how fatuous it was. But it was out.

He smiled then, drew a deep breath, and conquered himself admirably. His voice was calm and clear, and he continued to speak as though referring to something that was slightly amusing. Underneath, however, his heart felt like a cold clump of lead.

"We have tried, my wife and I, in the best ways we knew, to save. Of course, we have doubtless made many mistakes, for which we are sorry. Since our marriage she has run most of our — ah — financial affairs."

He laughed a composed little laugh. "It's not pleasant to discuss these things exactly. But since it has come up, I will be very frank. My lean days in college gave us a poor start indeed. We'll not speak of it. My wife overcame that to an extent. By means of following a strict budget and by denying ourselves everything within good reason, we have always been in such a condition, the Lord be thanked, that we had sufficient to eat. Of course, we have not been able" — he smiled — "to gather much into the barns, in fact, nothing." His voice dropped. "You all know there have been troubles for me, which have now also caused a certain amount of debt."

There was a hushed silence in the church. He squared his shoulders and drew another long breath.

"Now, in regard to such things as fairly decent clothes, a hat now and then, a toy for a child, a chicken at Christmas, let us not despise these things. If we do, there is the grave danger of becoming too unappreciative of God's gifts and of beginning to love money more than the things we are supposed to buy with it. This is extremely dangerous. In general, let us beware of giving too much thought to

money and the saving of it; for the love of money is really the root of all the evil there is in the world."

He sat down.

Pillhaus had been waiting for him to finish. Immediately he arose in defense of Old Weissman and declared that he had never known that the soul-saving duty of a minister included his being sarcastic.

He struck the spark. A battle broke loose. George Willing, who at college had been named "Willing George" and during his eight years in Sunken Hollow had given his own advantages very few thoughts, was the unwilling center of all this strife. He sat there, outwardly quiet, but growing more heavy-hearted every moment, and tried to stem the rushing tide of anger that flowed in from every side, back and forth, pro and con, in that poor little church-building. With ever-increasing bitterness he saw these people whom he had taught for eight years to be peaceful and loving and unselfish and forgiving, — he saw them fighting, fighting about a little money for which he had not even asked. It was terrible. What private things were all revealed in that bitter argument, what family squabbles dragged forth, what hidden feuds exposed, alarmed him, shook him to his manly foundation, and struck dull despair to his heart.

He was the pastor of these men, the guardian, so to speak, of their immortal souls. His body grew cold, began to shiver. He prayed for strength and received it. He finally rose, white of face and stern of brow. His voice shook, but his jaw was squared hard. He looked positively dangerous. The bedlam fell away into a deathly hush when he raised his hand for quiet.

What he said was given to him by God. In that situation no man of himself could have spoken as he did. No one present could mistake his motives, no one could doubt

his sincerity. He punished them for their quarreling; he flayed them for their avarice. With words that came like shots he dealt out to every one the particular admonition he needed. And they took it. They bowed their heads, knowing, feeling, that such a deluge of reproof contained no personal element of their pastor, George Willing, but was all truth straight from heaven.

"Now, brethren," he ended, "let us go home and say no more. Let each think for himself until the next quarterly meeting, and then let each one come back saying to himself the words, 'I want to do what is right, and I will not quarrel.' And let us learn to be sincere, first with ourselves and then with others. Let us judge no man. God help us!"

That ended that stormy meeting.

George went to his house, entirely unable to show a cheerful face. Some things are even beyond a strong man's power. He could not hide his feelings from Mary, as he had done many times before in those eight years.

She glanced at the clock and said, "But it's late, George."

"Yes," he answered dully. "Sometimes it seems as if — it's too late." And he sat down.

She came to him, in that moment a woman of power, frail and tender as she was, a woman stronger than a man.

She sat down on the arm of his chair, and they looked long into each other's eyes. Then she kissed him.

"George," she said, "I understand. It's never too late, George. Don't ever think that. Be strong. Any other man in any other work,—a farmer, a doctor, a merchant,— their labor is hard, yes, but their battle is against things more easily conquered. A minister's life is a battle against evil. And evil is the strongest enemy. But you have God on your side, George. Don't forget that."

"I've done the best I could," he said. "I know their failing, that's why I never even spoke of my small salary, even though we had to make debts. I knew what was coming." He sighed. "But, after all, perhaps it was my fault. Perhaps I should have spoken, told them oftener. I don't know. God knows I don't care for money. If I did, I wouldn't be here."

His words were very bitter, so bitter that she couldn't answer. Her voice stuck in her throat. Her bravery failed her. Tears filled her eyes. She fought to keep from crying out. Was this the reward for all her work, all her planning and figuring, for all the sacrifice and the struggle and the pain of eight years to keep up daily life against odds? Where was appreciation, gratitude, the love of one human being for another? Where was Christianity? For her this was really the first moment in those eight years when she seemed entirely bewildered and beaten.

Her good old father came that evening. "What!" he said cheerfully, noting the depression in both at once. "Gloom? My, that's bad for the nerves, children. Tell me your troubles."

They told him everything. It took half an hour. He sat down, put his old gray head to one side, and considered it a while. Then he broke into merry laughter.

"Well, George, my boy," he said, "if these people wouldn't be as they are about money, you really wouldn't have much to preach against. They attend church regularly, they pray in their houses and read the Bible, they talk Christianity. The only thing that's wrong with them is that they're close and a little in love with money. Well, now, that will get better right along. We must make them see their mistake. I've taught that thing over in Bitter Point for all these years. And I see improvement, too. God's Word is never in vain, you know. Don't give up,

George. Show them where they fail, show them often, and the Lord will do the rest. Just watch, — see if this meeting, and the words you spoke, won't have some good effect already."

Old Teacher Meller was a marvel. At least he seemed so to his daughter and son-in-law. They wondered at his courage, his optimism. They did not consider that many times during his younger days he had wilted just like George under the *barrage* of adverse conditions and had been on the point of asking about the use of it all. But life and its troubles had tempered his spirit. So many years of battling against his own wishes and desires had given him happiness. Happiness, he found, did not really consist in a full measure of everything material, but really in the conquest of oneself. In other words, his faith in God was strong enough to keep him smiling at all things, regardless of what they were.

As weeks passed on, George and Mary gradually forgot what had happened in that turbulent Sunday meeting. There was much to take their minds off such things.

George's daily routine about the house was filled with activity. Early the chickens were fed, and the cow was milked. A morning walk with the children, during which he answered a thousand questions on every conceivable topic. Breakfast. Mary and he always sang songs in two voices when they washed the dishes together. Then a few hours of study. Before dinner some kind of job about the yard — bedding the horse's stable, moving the cow to a better grazing-space, cleaning the hen-yard, churning butter, etc. After dinner out with the horse and buggy on visits to his people. Sometimes he took Mary and Helen along, and little Ruthie raised a clamor.

Twilight in spring and summer and fall was wonderful. The whole family went strolling through the woods

near by. They listened to the murmur of the tall trees and drank the cool water of a bubbling spring on the hill. Life seemed a matchless thing to George and Mary when the sun went down and their children fell asleep out there in the open with the rosy light of the dying day on their plump faces. Sometimes they waited until dusk before going home. The two little girls would wake up and walk, but Ruthie had to be carried. She was a dead weight when she slept, having no worries.

After almost every trip into the woods they would stop in the small cemetery near the house, where little Georgie and his good grandmother slept. By the two graves they would sit in quiet reverence, often lingering till dusk. All summer long those two graves had a profusion of flowers. George cared for them as one would for a favorite garden. It seemed, when he planted the flowers and caught the fragrance of their blooming, that the two dear ones who lay under them were almost at his side. Only in winter, when icy winds and snow-drifts covered them entirely, did George's mother and his little son seem lost to him.

It was two months after that memorable congregation meeting that Old Weissman called one day at the parsonage. He brought with him two spring chickens, already dressed.

"They should taste good to you," he said to Mary, who answered his knock because George was busy in his study.

She was quite overcome. There was moisture in his wrinkled old eyes and a queer twitch at his lips.

"Why, thank you very much," she stammered. "I — I'll call George — the pastor, I mean. I guess you want to see him, don't you?"

"No," he said, "he's got his work to do, I guess. He knows why I come." Again he took her hand and patted it. It was quite embarrassing. "Sometimes — we say some-

thing," he faltered, "we don't mean. We make bad mistakes — you tell him, Pastor Willing — I made such troubles — for him. I'm sorry."

And very suddenly Old Weissman sat down on the doorstep and wiped the tears out of his eyes with his brown old fingers. Mary was tremendously touched. She looked down at his bald head with its thin white hair and scarcely knew what to say because her throat was so full.

"Why," she managed finally, "why, that's all been forgotten long ago, Mr. Weissman. We all make our mistakes."

"Yes," he agreed, "but I made such a bad one. I know myself now, so many years — what I ought to do, and I don't do it. I got a voice — I can speak, but what I say — it makes only trouble for the pastor. But I didn't mean it." He wiped more tears. "But I make it good, too. So, last week we had a meeting in my house, and we come to a decision, we did. Everybody voted for it without no trouble at all. You tell the pastor we decided to give him three dollars more a month — that's thirty-six dollars more a year!"

CHAPTER X.

IOTA.

Little things can bring very big changes in a life.

One morning early in spring when George Willing made his daily trip to his rural post-box, he took out a single small envelope. In the envelope was a formally written document calling him as pastor to another field and requesting his early consideration and acceptance.

In the narrow path that led from the post-box to his home on the hill he stood still and read the writing again from beginning to end. And when he looked up, somehow those old rural surroundings of his seemed suddenly dearer to him than ever before. The poor little church with its cemetery and tombstones. The old parsonage, so vast of interior and so freezing cold every winter. The green hill and the towering trees. The golden fields and the great forest. For nine years all these things had been his. Of course, he did not own them, he owned practically nothing on earth, but nevertheless they were his. Could he leave them now?

He looked down again at the paper in his hand. If he would follow the call sent him, how would the change affect his whole existence? Where a man finds his first happiness, that place is always fair to him. Could any other place, regardless of its better position or its advantages, ever become its equal?

Filled with uncertainty and doubt, he took the letter into the house and handed it to Mary without a word. When she saw its contents, her eyes widened. She put down the paper and looked at him. Facing each other, they both drew marked sighs.

Neither could actually say whether it constituted pain or pleasure.

"Well?" he asked finally.

She looked again at the paper. "What's the name of the place — Iota?"

"Iota. That's right."

"But, George, what kind of name is that?"

Impulsively he laughed. "Sounds small, doesn't it? It is a small town. Over three hundred miles from here, I imagine."

Then they sat down on the sofa and considered the call together, now, after the first surprise, with a more settled mind.

"The church is larger," she said presently. "More members."

He said, "And a better building, no doubt, than we have here in Sunken Hollow. Of course, it isn't the building, but — well —"

She cried, "Look, George! It says here, 'a seven-room two-story parsonage.' I'm sure it's a nice house, being in a town, you know, nice and up to date; and I suppose it's warm and cozy in winter, too. It would be quite different, wouldn't it?"

He nodded and said in turn, "This Iota is close to a larger city, I believe. There would be access to a library, for instance."

"And to better stores and all kinds of things," she added. "One could go shopping once in a while. Oh, I would love to go shopping — and, George, look here — the salary is better, too."

"Somewhat, yes. Of course, prices may be higher, too."

And after a while she mused, "I'm thinking, too, of the — well, the social side, you might say. We'd live on a street, we'd have neighbors. There would be little after-

noon gatherings with friends. Parties. You know what I mean, don't you, George?"

"Yes, I know. It would be wonderful for you. I suppose the church people do live more closely together. Not so much space between. Not so quiet and dead."

They both paused a while, dreaming.

"Do you know, Mary," he remarked, "here we've been considering all the personal advantages we'd have. We're becoming a bit materialistic, I fear. What about those people and the work I'm to do? Where am I needed more, here or there? Where could my efforts be of the greatest blessing?"

She drew a long breath. "Well, after all, it's up to you, George. You must decide. I'm not going to influence you, but it certainly would be a wonderful change. Remember I've lived in this district all my life."

In the days that followed he was naturally alone with his thoughts. On the following Sunday he put the call before a meeting of his church. The good farmers were quite stunned. After a heavy silence one of them finally rose and asked the clumsy question, "What do you think, pastor?"

"I have decided that I wish to go," was George's answer.

It stunned them again.

A discussion began. George soon found that his continued presence in Sunken Hollow was very much desired. They were loath to let him go. So sincere was their wish to keep him that they even offered to raise his salary. To that George answered that money was no object with him. It really wasn't, though it certainly would be a great help to him in his affairs. But he was convinced that he could do good work in Iota and be of greater service than in Sunken Hollow.

So the farmers went home with dazed faces and told their wives and families what was to happen.

"We're going to lose our pastor. He's going away. With heavy hearts we gave him a peaceful dismissal."

It was bad news to everybody. Mrs. Stark wept at intervals for days, going about her work with red eyes and the attitude of one who has suffered some great calamity. The parsonage had many visitors, who all said how sorry they were about everything. And they brought gifts — hams, chickens, fruit, vegetables. In those final weeks there was better continuous fare in the parsonage than there had been in all the past nine years.

"Iota," said old Teacher Meller, laughing. "A small town? In a small town, George, a big man can do big things."

The packing and shipping of his household goods took George several days. It was a new experience, and not a light one. He came through it with several blisters and a blue thumb-nail. His cheerful disposition was also temporarily impaired.

One evening there was a farewell meeting in the little room where George had taught school for nine years. In his farewell address he told the people how pleasant those years — nine short years, he said — had been and how he would always remember how happy he had been in Sunken Hollow. And he wished them all the continued blessings of God. They sat in gloomy silence. Many of the women and the older men wept stealthy tears, and the whole assembly made very serious faces for their pastor, who had always been so good and who had always asked so little.

So Mary and George took special leave of Mary's people in Bitter Point and also of good Mrs. Stark, who could hardly speak for tears. Their last few hours in Sunken Hollow were spent at the graves of Mother

Willing and little Georgie. Then, with their children, they moved to Iota.

Iota was a small town; a quiet, pretty place with shaded streets and a handsome brick church and a school. It seemed to possess a slumbering kind of peace and abundant good will. Yet here some of the stormiest years of George's full life were spent.

Although he was first coming to conquer, he was received like a conquering hero. The first night he spent with his family at the home of a deacon of the church. That evening a welcome gathering took place in the building that contained the parish-school rooms. Coffee and cake, speeches and songs. George shook hundreds of eager hands until his arm actually grew weary. He tried to remember all the names and faces. There was an address of welcome given by Mr. Kay, who, as George learned afterward, happened to be the teacher of the school. And George made a hearty response.

Naturally, that evening was one of great excitement for him. It was for Mary, too. She could not sleep that night. Several times he was up out of bed. The fact was he couldn't sleep himself.

"It's upset your nerves a bit — with the moving and everything," he told her tenderly, in whispers so as not to disturb the people of the house, stroking her forehead with his fingers. "My little Mary! You were so beautiful to-night! So pretty and plucky! They liked you — all the people. I could see that."

"Oh, yes," she whispered, pursing her lips and smiling up at him. "I'm feeling all right, George. It's just that I can't sleep, you know. They were all so wonderful to me and the children. You know, George," she whispered very softly, "everything is so fine, the church and the

school. There must be a fine parsonage, too. At last we're going to have a nice home."

He pressed his lips to her forehead.

"I'm so glad for you, dear! But, now, don't think about these things. Don't excite yourself. Take it easy and try to get some rest. It's rest you need."

In the adjoining room the church deacon sat up in bed, looking very much unlike a deacon in his white night-shirt. He prodded his wife and addressed her in a careful whisper.

"Hey! They've been up and around in that next room for a half-hour, whispering. What do you suppose is wrong?"

"Oh, lie down," she told him. "A person would think you were an old woman. Do you think it's easy for people to come into a new place like this with three little children and meet all those strange people like to-night? I tell you it's a big strain. That little woman ought to have stayed right here to-night. If I had my way, there wouldn't be no welcome receptions. It's too hard on the new preachers and even harder on their wives."

"But," he argued, "he's got to meet the people, don't he? And we wanted to give them a good time first off."

"He could have met the people gradually," she said. "That would have been more sensible anyway. You see what a good time they had to-night? They can't even sleep. Now lie down, and don't you wake me up again. Remember I've got them on my hands for at least a week. Of course, I'm not kicking, but —"

The deacon spent a further hour of his night lying there, trying to figure out why the new minister and his wife shouldn't have enjoyed the welcome reception the church board had so carefully planned for them.

The next morning George and Mary went with the deacon to see their future parsonage. It was around the corner from the church and school, a frame building. For some reason of his own, after unlocking the door for them, the deacon disappeared and left them pass through the rooms alone.

They passed along, looking to left and right. It was some time before either could speak.

"Well," George said queerly, "it's a good thing we have never been used to anything elaborate. Isn't it?"

"Yes," said Mary, in a dull tone.

He squared his jaw. "Oh, cheer up," he told her, seeing the great disappointment on her face. "I see it's been newly papered, and some painting's been done, too. But I'd certainly like to meet the architect who designed this place, Mary. Oh, what a grand mistake!"

Mary put her hand somewhat frantically to her face. "Oh, those floors," she cried. "What will we do, George?"

He looked down at the wide, rough boards, thinking of slivers. "Oh," he said, "we'll cover the floors, of course."

"With what? We've only got two rugs. We can't afford more. Look at that hall! And the steps! Oh! Oh!"

Two bedrooms were up-stairs, right under the roof. They had not been touched by the decorator. In two of the bare walls the plaster was out. And here the floors were still worse.

"I can't understand it," Mary whispered, "when they've got such a nice church and school."

"Oh, I think we can fix up the place," he said, drawing a breath and trying to be optimistic.

"There's no basement. Not a room can be closed off. We'll have the same old heating problem. This is not a solid building either. Why, look at those windows."

"Well," said George, "don't worry, whatever you do. We'll cross all bridges when we come to them." He went to her and put an arm about her. "I really think we can make this place attractive, Mary, in a way, with our things when they come. Sh!" he whispered suddenly. "Here comes the deacon again."

The deacon clumped up the narrow steps and entered, looking a bit sheepish.

"I just had a little thing to attend to up the street," he explained. And then there was a queer pause. He drew a long breath. "Well, it's not so much, this house," he went on in a voice too loud to be natural. "You see we always wanted to build a new parsonage, but it seems we just never get around to it. When the church and school were built, we ran into debt, you know, and the payments kept us busy. This is not the original parsonage, you know. We had one at first right next door, where that empty lot is now. You should have seen that one. It was condemned at last, and we had to tear it down. This building was the one next to it. We picked it up cheap."

He checked himself, suddenly realizing that he might be telling things. "Well," he finished, rubbing his head nervously, "in a few years, I guess, everything will all be different. We have to do the best we can."

George and Mary only nodded at his flow of words spoken in half-embarrassment. It was difficult for them to find any kind of answer. The Iota parsonage happened to be nearly an ancient wreck, and no amount of talking could change it.

That first week, while he waited for his furniture to arrive by freight, George had the arduous task of visiting all his members in their homes. Mr. Kay, the teacher, accompanied him. George enjoyed it. At almost every place he was served with something to eat. He was able to

brave that; but Mr. Kay, who was an elderly man and had a rather poor stomach, suffered considerably.

Most of the members owned comfortable houses. A number of them were newly built and of face brick, which was then coming into style. All the people liked their new minister. His tall, impressive form, his handsome face and polite bearing, his friendly conversation, chiefly perhaps his noticeable modesty, instantly won him friends.

One of the founders of the original church still lived. It was old Mr. Wiltman, who had long been confined to a wheel-chair. He, too, liked George already at first sight.

"I'm glad to meet our new pastor," he said, gripping George's firm hand in his very thin, trembling one. "I'm glad to see him so strong and healthy. Our church needs a strong man, you see. Tell me, Pastor, can you be sharp, too?"

George laughed at that. "Perhaps. When the occasion arises."

"It will arise sometimes." Old Wiltman shook his head, and George was not exactly sure whether it was in nervousness or despair. "Sit down, Pastor. I'm an old man. I don't say much. I'll tell you just one thing. I've lived in Iota fifty years. In this congregation, Pastor, everybody is related to everybody. Cousins, uncles, aunts, brothers, and sisters-in-law — and so they go. Everybody knows everybody's business, and if he don't, he makes it his business to find out. You understand what I mean?"

"I think I do."

"Well, that's Iota. And you will have to be sharp, Pastor — sometimes. That's all I'll say."

George thanked him. He replied, in effect, that in no church a minister could expect to find perfect conditions. If people were perfect, there would be little need of a church.

"As far as I know the people now," he finished, "they are really splendid souls."

Old Wiltman smiled. "Yes," he said. "They are so — often. But remember, Pastor, the good in people is very easy to see; they keep showing that, but the bad they hide. That will take time to find out."

Outside, George said to Mr. Kay, "He's quite a philosopher, this old Mr. Wiltman, isn't he?"

"Oh, yes," said Mr. Kay. "He's seen many things in his life."

Mr. Kay, somehow, struck George as a silent person, who gave very little information. Genial enough, but unresponsive.

The furniture arrived within a week. A wagon hauled it to the parsonage. George donned old clothes, borrowed a hammer and a screw-driver from the deacon, and began the task of unpacking the crates. It was then that he first learned of the havoc that a simple railroad ride can play with a poor pastor's furniture. No piece arrived in absolutely uninjured condition. Some things had suffered more than others. He wondered what Mary would say.

Without telling her, he tried to repair and polish things as best he could. But when she came in the afternoon, she looked at each article of furniture.

"Oh, George," she cried in a pitiful tone. "They might have had a heart for our few pretty things."

"Railroad hands," he said solemnly, "are railroad hands, Mary."

"Yes," she answered, "and pastors are pastors. When they move, they can't sell all their things and buy new ones. Impossible." Sudden chagrin cut through her voice.

"Let's forget it," he suggested. "It's the best thing we can do, Mary."

They set to work that day to make that questionable

parsonage attractive. The deacon's wife kept their children. They labored hard. Often he made her sit down and rest. When she became interested, she never knew how hard she was working. Sitting down, she would direct his activities from her chair. Her ideas and her taste finally showed in all the arrangements. They came home that evening to their temporary quarters in the deacon's house both dead tired.

"It's not right that you should have all that work," the deacon's wife said to them. "To-morrow I'll help. I just didn't want to interfere the first day, you know. A person doesn't like to."

It was very obvious that the deacon's wife happened to be a woman of rare good sense.

By and by, in a few days, the parsonage began to look comfortable and cozy. Its aspect was quite changed. The result really delighted both George and Mary.

"See," he cried, "we'll have a decent place, after all. I told you we could fix it up."

"If it only wouldn't be for the floors," she whispered. The deacon's wife, helping in the next room, happened to overhear the remark.

The next day that question was answered, and by the people of Iota, under the direction of the deacon's wife. Two new floor-coverings arrived, one a woven rug for the front room, the other, linoleum, for the hall.

Mary's eyes grew wide and tender when she saw these things.

"Why, who sent them?" she gasped incredulously.

"Oh, the people!" he cried. "See what kind of people they are! Splendid!"

They laid the new woven rug at once in the front room, and the linoleum was laid in the hall. That front room, Mary said, was to be their main room. It

could be made into something really attractive with curtains, and pillows, and doilies, and everything.

The Thursday of that second week was ladies' aid day. Mary attended the meeting. She was given a wonderful welcome. All the ladies were so considerate and kind.

Mrs. Blum, the president of the aid, drew her aside after the business of the meeting was over.

"I know it's hard for you, Mrs. Willing, to make such a big change right now," she whispered. "But don't you worry about anything. All the ladies understand. We're going to do all the sewing for you and everything. You just sit down and take it easy — until the baby comes." She patted Mary's back like a mother."

Mary wept little tears of joy and gratitude at that. She couldn't keep them back. They just flowed down her cheeks. Mrs. Blum put an arm entirely about her, kissed her cheek, and said tenderly, "There! That's all right." Mary could hardly wait until she got home in order to tell George all about it.

On the second Friday they had their first meal in the parsonage. The deacon's sensible wife had come over and cooked it, insisting that Mrs. Willing should rather lie down and rest.

"She worked so hard," she whispered to George. "Just look at that front room. Did you ever see anything so neat and tasteful? Curtains and everything. It's wonderful! If I didn't know it, I wouldn't believe that room was in this old, rickety parsonage."

"Yes," George agreed. "Well, I'm thankful we're settled at last. Now she can rest easily. There'll be no more trouble."

After supper was over, the whole family spent the evening in that charming front room. Mary's eyes shone with good spirits. And George seemed unusually cheerful.

"Well, children," he said to his three little ones, "here we are all together in Iota, and as the years go by, there will be many a story to tell. Just you see!"

They went to bed early because they were extremely tired. In the two up-stairs rooms it would be nice and quiet for sleeping, and with the light out, one couldn't see the dirty, broken walls. During the night a vicious thunderstorm, which had been several days in coming, swept over the town, and it rained in torrents. It was not the brilliant flashing of lightning in the windows nor the crash of thunder that woke them. It was water, "wet water," dripping at regular intervals from the ceiling into their faces.

George sat up sleepily, looking startled. "Something," he said, "seems to be the matter with the roof."

"Oh, the whole bed is wet!" cried Mary.

Bare-footed on that rough floor, George tiptoed toward the lamp and lighted it. He surveyed the ceiling a while, scratching his tousled head with vehemence.

"Hm!" he said. "Must be a heavy rain outside all right. Look — it's dripping from several places. I'm afraid that roof is very leaky."

"There's a dry corner over there," said Mary, pointing to that place.

George sighed. "Guess we'll have to move the bed. No, you needn't get out. Stay in. I'll just pull it over."

So with a loud, scraping noise he began to move the bed. It was heavy, but George was strong. In order to swing it into position, he was obliged to lift it slightly at the head end. In the same moment, however, he happened to step with his bare foot upon an upturned sliver in the floor. He winced and forthwith dropped the bed. It came down with a hard bang. Then, underneath somewhere, there was a rumble and a mighty crash, louder almost than the thunder.

Mary sat bolt upright, and George stood very still.

"What was that?"

"I — I don't know."

They listened breathlessly. Nothing happened. Presently a small cloud of dust began coming up the old stairway. Mary sniffed.

"Oh! It's plaster! The plaster — below us!"

"It must have come down," George burst out.

White-faced, they gazed at each other.

"Oh," he cried suddenly, "it's the front room — below us. The front room, Mary!"

Both slumped suddenly and sighed. Mary lay back in her pillow and closed her eyes. She felt weak, and she was weak. Immediately George knelt on the bed and stroked her forehead with great tenderness.

"Mary! Mary!" he murmured. "The little things in life, don't let them affect you so."

In that moment he probably forgot that she was a woman, and a woman, even a pastor's wife, must live and do and feel as any woman does, or she will suffer.

Meanwhile the storm raged; and in the opposite corner of the room the rain-water dripped with perfect regularity. In the next room the three little girls slept soundly. Neither the storm nor the noise nor the calamity below had even disturbed them.

But Mary heard that water dripping in her slumber. And in a bad dream she saw her pretty front room, in which she had worked so hard, in a terrible mess of dust and broken plaster.

And the actuality, the next morning, proved even worse than the dream.

In referring to that incident, the people of Iota always said later, "Wasn't it too bad — just when they had moved into the house! It was surely a hard start for them in Iota."

CHAPTER XI.

THE FIRST SUNDAY.

On the first Sunday after his installation George Willing preached his opening sermon. The place was crowded to the doors. In addition to all regular church-members there were many townspeople who were not affiliated with any church. Curiosity is a powerful agent in producing all kinds of patronage.

For instance, there was the druggist of Iota, a man of some education, who never went to any church. The town scoffer, Henry Dant, known to everybody as "Old Hickory." Dant, who owned much property in Iota and felt very secure in his opulent position. Mrs. Preismeyer, who had caused more actual damage in the town than the tornado which had swept over it years before. Even the fat proprietor of the hotel and bar and the ticket agent at the railroad station, off a few hours from duty, had come to take a peep at the new minister.

Under all this critical scrutiny, George made a fair enough impression. Standing in his pulpit with his tall, manly figure and his sincere mien, he also compelled their interest and attention.

"I like him," the town druggist decided for himself. He's natural. That's a whole lot. He doesn't try to put on a face like an ancient prophet nor make his voice sound like the trumpets of angels. Nothing proud or bombastic about that man. Guess I'll come to church once in a while and see what he has to say."

The ticket agent, the fat hotel-keeper, and "Old Hickory" Dant sat together — birds of one feather.

"Well, he looks like a good, square fellow," the fat hotel-keeper whispered; and the ticket agent dodged the

remark slightly, for the hotel-keeper's breath was strongly charged with the smell of stale beer.

"Old Hickory" Dant whispered, "Bah! They all look alike, these preachers. I never had no use for any of them."

"Well," the ticket agent remarked, "he ought to be able to handle this Iota crowd. He looks husky enough. I'm for him. He's got my vote."

And Mrs. Preismeyer said to herself, "Now maybe I can come back to church again. He looks at least like he treats a person right."

All the members of the church were immensely pleased with their new pastor, even elated.

After the service they surrounded him with ready felicitations. George, perspiring profusely, was in the midst of an effusive, chattering circle. He tried to hear everything that was said to him, answer every question politely, to smile continuously, and to grip hands. After the powerful sermon he had preached, into which he had put every ounce of his strength, this was hard labor.

One of the church-members came to him presently, a tall, handsome, well-dressed woman.

"You remember me?" she said to George. "I'm Mrs. Harry Twack."

"Oh, yes," said George, although he wasn't quite sure about it. "Good morning, Mrs. Twack."

"You're coming to have dinner with us to-day," she stated positively, "you and your family."

"Why, thank you, Mrs. Twack. You're certainly very kind. We'll do that."

She smiled. "I'll just wait for you here, Reverend." She took her position near a pew.

"Very well," he said, going back to his work of shaking

hands. When the crowd had melted a bit, he found Mary and the children, and they prepared to go with Mrs. Twack.

As they emerged from the church-door, a strange thing occurred. Another well-dressed lady leaped from an elegant buggy and came toward them with an outraged look on her face.

"But, Reverend Willing," she cried, "you are coming with us!"

"He's not!" charged Mrs. Twack with an angry look. "He's coming with us."

George stood still and looked at the outraged lady.

"Let me see," he floundered helplessly, "you were —"

"I'm Mrs. Theodore Sass, of course! You —"

"Oh, yes, yes. That's right," he acknowledged quickly. "Mrs. Sass, how are you? And you say —"

"That you're coming with us to dinner!"

"He's not!" trumpeted Mrs. Twack, this time with added emphasis. "He's coming with us."

At that George stood entirely uncertain and ill at ease, and Mary, too, seemed to suffer. They noticed that Mrs. Twack and Mrs. Sass glared at each other with burning eyes and compressed mouth. The situation was quite painful.

"Why," began George, a bit lamely, addressing Mrs. Sass, "you see, Mrs. Twack here has just invited us, and hers being the first —"

"But you promised me, Reverend!"

"I — promised you?"

"Why, yes. Just a few minutes ago there in church. I invited you and your family, and you said, 'Yes, of course.' "

George stood still and gazed.

"Oh!" he deplored, "I must not have heard you right —

that is — I mean it was simply a misunderstanding." He stopped and glanced questioningly at Mrs. Twack.

But Mrs. Twack was not looking at him. She was still glaring spitefully at Mrs. Sass, and Mrs. Sass was as spitefully glaring back. Just a silent, deadly stare.

A very queer pause fell.

"Oh dear," Mary faltered, in order to say something, "what a terrible mistake!"

Still the pause continued. George seemed painfully embarrassed. The blood rushed to his face. He saw that others who were leaving the church were beginning to watch the incident with interest.

He cleared his throat as though it hurt him.

"Well," he brought out finally, "I rather think that since Mrs. Sass's was the first invitation, although I really didn't hear it —"

"Oh, I asked you, Reverend," Mrs. Sass cut in. "I wouldn't lie about it."

"Oh, of course not, of course not, Mrs. Sass. There's no doubt —"

"I wonder if there isn't any doubt," shot out Mrs. Twack, beside herself.

"You can wonder all you like," shot back Mrs. Sass, biting her lips. "It's just like you to say that!"

But here George interrupted, suddenly master of this scene. "This is really not right, ladies. Of course, I appreciate your wishing to do me a great favor, but —" he stopped and tried to laugh lightly. "Oh, but — now, let's say no more about it. It's just a little thing, Mrs. Twack. You'll understand, I'm sure. Since Mrs. Sass invited us first, we'll have to go with her. It's only fair. There will be other Sundays, you know. Isn't that right?"

"Well," said Mrs. Twack with a sigh, "you'll have to suit yourself, Reverend Willing."

And with another angry glance at Mrs. Sass she turned and swept herself proudly away.

So George and his family had dinner at the home of Mrs. Sass, but they hardly enjoyed it.

"It's just too terrible," Mary whispered to him at the first private opportunity. "And that such a thing had to happen on your first Sunday. Oh, George! They must not like each other."

"Forget it," George said and laughed lightly. But the dinner produced in him a case of nervous indigestion, the very first in his life.

One of the church deacons, Peter Closs, had listened attentively to George's first sermon. He had a wife at home who was sick with rheumatism. To her he explained many of the things that the new pastor had said. He couldn't remember the exact words, but he recalled the meaning.

"A preacher is a friend of the people," he related, thinking hard. "What does that mean — friend? A friend is a man who wants to do the best he can for another man. What is the best thing he can do? Not anything for this world, but something for the next. God's Word is the best thing a preacher can give to another man. It's the main thing he should give."

"Oh, yes," she said, softness showing in her suffering eyes.

"And he said he likes his job, too," Peter went on. "He knows a preacher's work is mighty hard and awful disappointing sometimes. But you can't compare that with all the happiness and satisfaction he gets from teaching people the truth that shows them the only way to heaven. Oh, he's a fine one, Lena. I think we got a good preacher. He said, no matter what would ever happen, it would always be a *delightful road,* his being a preacher. He's a man for us, now!"

"I'm glad," Lena said, rubbing her aching limbs. "I only hope the people will appreciate him and treat him better than they did our last pastor."

"Sure, I hope so myself," he answered, thinking deeply about it. "He don't look so weak as our last one. I don't think he'll break down so easy. He's a big fellow. I just wonder, Lena, what he thought of the parsonage. If I had my way, we'd have rented a different one for him. His wife looks like she likes nice things — a pretty little woman."

"Yes. And the salary he gets is awful, you know, when you consider —. I wonder how they'll get along."

Peter Closs was still thinking. Suddenly he laughed.

"You know, Lena, he got his first taste already to-day of that Twack and Sass business?"

"He did?"

"Yep! I noticed Mrs. Twack and Mrs. Sass arguing about who was going to have him for dinner. You might know both would be the first to invite him after all the trouble they made for our last minister."

"Oh! It's a shame. On his first Sunday they started up already."

"Well, I guess he'll get used to them. Hope he don't treat them too easy. Oh, by the way, guess who was in church, Lena? "Old Hickory" and the hotel man, and the ticket agent even. And the druggist! And, oh — Mrs. Preismeier, too!"

"Well, well!" exclaimed Lena, raising a crippled hand. "What's going to happen?"

On Monday afternoon, Mary first became acquainted with her next-door neighbor. The lady, evidently Irish, with a prominent jaw and two great arms, leaned over the back fence and addressed her while she was shaking out a dust mop.

"I s'pose you're the new preacher's wife." She smiled amiably.

"Why, yes," Mary answered.

"Well, my name is Mrs. Mitchell. I don't go to church, but I know everybody."

"Oh?" said Mary. "Well, I'm glad to know you, Mrs. Mitchell."

"Don't mention it. I guess we'll be good neighbors. I think you're so sweet-looking. I heard you had Sunday dinner at the Sasses yesterday."

Quickly Mary looked up. "Why, yes, we did."

"How did you like that Mrs. Sass?"

"Why, I think she's a nice person."

"Oh, yes, she's that when she wants to be. But she's a trouble-maker, too. You'll find that out yet, you folks."

"Yes?" said Mary and shook her mop vigorously. "It's a very beautiful day, isn't it, Mrs. Mitchell?"

"Well, we could stand a little rain. This Mrs. Sass, you know, she's a fine one, she and Mrs. Twack, if you know her already. Those two, they've been fighting around for over twenty years. It's been the talk of the town."

"I see," said Mary. "But we just had rain the other night, Mrs. Mitchell, and it came down in torrents. Don't you remember?"

"That's right, now. We did have a shower, didn't we? You know this Mrs. Sass, when she was a girl, she wanted the fellow Mrs. Twack got, that's Mr. Twack now. Ever since that they've been on the war-path. Always trying to get ahead of each other. When the Twacks built a swell house, the Sasses built a sweller one. Neither of 'em could afford it. And their kids, say, they could throw knives into each other. Once Johnny Twack and Sammy Sass had a bloody fist fight, and the two families had to go to the magistrate about it. The people claimed that the parents was coaxing the kids to sail into each other."

"I think," said Mary, raising her head suddenly and sniffing, "that my potatoes need water. Won't you excuse me, Mrs. Mitchell?" And she ran into the house.

"Don't mention it," the Irishwoman called after her. "See you again sometime. We can have another nice chat."

Mary told George about it at once. George only smiled, though his eyes looked thoughtful.

"Remember, Mary," he said, "when we were thinking of Iota back there in Sunken Hollow, you said that we would probably have neighbors?"

She nodded and began to smile.

"Well," he continued, "that's one of our neighbors, Mrs. Mitchell. Learn to know her. Nice, no doubt. But too talkative. All we ever must do is listen. Never converse back. Sometimes we can even try to avoid listening as politely as possible. You know what I mean."

"Yes, I know. I listened to only half of it."

"It's all right, dear." He took her hand and brushed it over his cheek. "There," he pointed through the window, "on the other side of us is a neighbor who cannot get us into any trouble."

He smiled up at her, and she laughed and understood. On the other side of the house was an empty lot.

CHAPTER XII.

ALL KINDS OF OCCURRENCES.

The new baby was a boy. Nothing could have pleased his father better nor his mother. He seemed a sturdy, healthy infant. They named him John.

When John grew up to the toddling age, he caused a considerable amount of worry and trouble, more trouble, in fact, than the three little girls together. Mary and Helen, by that time, were going to school, and Mr. Kay said of them that they couldn't be doing any better. Ruthie was always inquiring when the day would come that she could also attend school. The answer was always, "Soon." Meanwhile she spent her time taking care of little John.

That required more than one person's attention. Little John was energetic and curious. Frequently he would fall from some perch upon which he had laboriously climbed with a loud bump and a howl. Mary was constantly on her feet. Relief for her came only when his two older sisters returned from school. The three little girls understood how to direct the baby's attention into other channels than those of mischief.

Their father George was ever a busy minister. In Sunken Hollow there had been much more time for leisure, but here there was work and work. However, he had no cause for complaint because he was so interested in his work.

All the days mentioned in his diary at this period were varied and colorful, loaded with all kinds of occurrences. Most of the events that could be called difficult were so because they were associated with some kind of disappointment. But since he knew that no person on earth was perfect, that every one had his peculiar faults, and that he

had those means which can cure all ailments, the Word of God, he always overcame whatever worries he had.

For instance, in his church at Iota the young unmarried people constituted a stiff problem. He rallied them and tried to marshal their forces for good. He attended their society meetings and often told them what was expected of them; for it actually rested with them whether or not the congregation would have a successful future.

One great trouble lay in what old Mr. Wiltman had said. Almost the whole congregation was related; and each young person knew the other's private inclinations and activities from birth up. This made for differences and jealousies, sometimes of a mild, but often of a very potent kind.

In a meeting the young folks would sit in a number of separate little bands, or cliques, among which opposition was obvious and plentiful. George had noticed it at once, but had chosen to overlook it for the first.

Behind each cause for opposition lay some family story. Here are some of the choice reasons for divisions that George gathered as time went on.

Number one: "She's always talking, wants to run everything. Well, she'd better not act so wise. She was always the dumbest in school, and if it wouldn't be for the money they suddenly inherited, — oh my — where would she be!"

Number two: "Just because he's got that job in the Iota Bank, is no reason for him to go around the way he does. My mother said when he was a boy, he never amounted to a thing, and the whole family was always ashamed of him."

Number three: "If she thinks she's pretty, well, she's alone in her opinion. I can't see it. Did I tell you the way she runs after that new young salesman in the hard-

ware store? It's a disgrace. Why, she had the nerve to invite him over for dinner last Sunday."

Number four: "They're going to get married in June. But I know something about them that you don't know. When her mother was a girl, she was the talk of the town, too."

Number five: "Look at the way she twists herself around in that new dress. She must think she's graceful. Well, listen, I know she can't afford clothes like that. They've got debts everywhere in town, and they don't pay up. And five years ago they —"

Number six: "They always want to be the main turkeys in everything. If they can't, they're mad. Don't I know? Just let me tell you something —"

Number seven: "Look at him! Always acting so good, always talking over everything with the minister. He's on all the committees. Well, he's got the minister fooled. If the minister would know what we know —"

And so forth. Every instance was a case of seeing the mote in a brother's eye and overlooking the beam in one's own eye. Pointing fingers instead of holding one's own nose.

George hated to see it go on. But he wished to be careful lest matters should be made worse by untimely advice or unwise stricture. To antagonize would be to lose, and he wanted to win.

But the thing became worse. One evening Mr. Kay, the teacher, came to him, completely discouraged. He said as much as soon as he entered the door. George asked him first to sit down and be comfortable.

"We all get discouraged once in a while," he told him. "I've had my moments."

"Yes," acknowledged Mr. Kay. "But other men in their work have a smaller scope, a lesser measure to con-

tend with. We in our church-work are required to do the impossible thing."

George smiled to cheer him a little. "What is the impossible thing, Mr. Kay?"

"To please everybody. It can't be done. We have many people to please, a hundred families. It can't be done, I say."

"No, it can't. That's true. — What has happened, Mr. Kay?"

"Oh, it's the choir." He raised both hands and drove them through his gray hair. "The choir will drive me crazy, Pastor. I'm an old man, I've led the choir for years. But I don't understand it yet — and never will."

"What's the matter with the choir?"

"That's what I want to know. If you'd ask me, Pastor, what a choir is really for, I'd say, 'Why, that's simple. It's to glorify God with songs in the church.' But this choir of mine, it's to glorify every one of its members, not God. They want to stand in the front of the church in their best clothes and be seen by everybody, and every last one of them wants to be the soloist. And if they can't, they're ready to fly at one another's throats and swallow me alive. I tell you, I'm going crazy."

"Oh, now, is it as bad as that?"

"Even worse." Mr. Kay rose and paced about. "Why, last night, in order to get the best effect from the singing, I wanted to change the way in which they sit on Sundays. You should have been there. Those in the rear rows thought it ought to be changed. Those in the front row fought like lions and tigers. It was fierce. I went home trembling all over."

George waited a long while, considering. "Well," he said at last, "you are dealing with sinful human nature,

Mr. Kay. Did you expect anything different when you went to work in the Church? Did you expect to find these singers to be, say, the same as a choir of angels would be?"

"I don't know," replied Mr. Kay, going through his hair again. "I don't expect anything — any more. I'll be all through very soon."

"Oh, Mr. Kay!"

"I meant it. They're driving me to it. I'm only a human being. I've stood everything for years. Now it's beyond my strength." He began to tremble.

George rose and tried to talk good cheer into him.

"You'll feel different to-morrow, Mr. Kay. Go home and pray and say to yourself, 'I'm in the world. The devil is forever against me because I'm trying to fight for the kingdom of heaven. He's trying to spoil all my choir songs by creating dissensions.' All these people know their mistakes, Mr. Kay. They'd be half-wits if they didn't. But they forget. It's their weakness. They give way to the devil, just as you are doing now, in being so discouraged. You and I, we have our faults as well as they. We are all human. Remember that. Each must try to bear the weakness of the other. It's a hard climb upward, fraught with many bad slips and even serious injuries. But it's a worth-while climb, with the goal always in sight. How many people, do you think, despite all their sins, accept the grace of Jesus and go to heaven? That's what the Church is for, Mr. Kay."

But it was not a light case with poor Mr. Kay. If his nervous system had been strong, he might have conquered himself. As it was, he had to take a complete rest for a month, during which time George was compelled to teach his school and lead his choir and, incidentally, get a taste of the work himself.

For a long time he had been thinking of the right words which he might say to his young people. This precipitated matters. He spoke to them one evening in one of the meetings.

"Do not be against one another. Be real Christians. When you feel weakness of any kind coming on, conquer it. Even in the world a weak character is despised. Let us learn to have the strength that is of the strongest kind. A good rule is this: Whenever we feel the urge to say something of some one that is mean or designed to hurt, or that would make it appear as though we were envious, let us close our lips tightly and say a little silent prayer for ourselves instead."

The effect came in two kinds when the young people took these words of the pastor home to their families for general discussion.

Effect number one: "Oh, is that so! Where in the world did he ever get the idea that there was anything like that going on? He'd better be careful, or he might insult somebody. That's no way. If the young people should go forward, they need encouragement, not a lot of criticism."

Effect number two: "Well, Pastor Willing is right about that. The young folks had better realize it. It's a good thing he said what he did. He saw what's what; and he's a minister, and it's his business to say what God thinks about such goings-on. The young people will never get anywhere in the church if they act against what God's Word teaches."

George discussed few of his affairs with Mary because he knew how things were likely to affect her. He told her only of the happy matters. There were plenty of them.

There were many joyful gatherings. Mary was a regular attendant at the ladies' aid. In the second year they

elected her president. She would take story-books to the meetings and read to the ladies in her inimitable way. George never saw her so pretty, flushed and happy as she was, as when she returned home after those affairs.

The congregation had in some way ascertained the date of its pastor's birthday. Every new year which he added to his age proved the occasion for a great celebration. No aged person or small child ever wanted to miss what was known by every one as "Pastor's Birthday Night."

All the holiday seasons brought gladness and good will. Christmas, as ever, was matchless. But in Iota, more than in Sunken Hollow, the social part of it could find greater expression.

There was a fireplace in that questionable parsonage of Iota. It had never been in working order, but one day George had cleaned out the chimney (he did most of the repairs on the parsonage personally), and after that the smoke passed through it very nicely. They always had a roaring log fire for Christmas.

Mary and Helen and Ruthie could sing the songs and speak the pieces they had in school. And little John, fat as a butter-ball, would stand by and babble after his own fashion.

"Mary," George would whisper to her, "there he is — our preacher. Look at him."

Often Mary gave that idea much thought.

"I hope we can manage it some day, George. Perhaps in years to come our position will be a little better."

"Let the Lord take care of it," George would say.

The Lord did take care of it later. From a distant uncle who died, Mary inherited the sum of three hundred and seventy-five dollars, her share of an estate divided among some fifteen or twenty relatives. She put it all aside to use some day for John's college expenses. All

but twenty-five dollars. For that she bought something the Willings till now could never afford — a gold watch for the head of the house.

"Mary, Mary!" George murmured, entirely overcome by it. "Oh, my little dear, that you should think so much of me! I'm ashamed of myself."

Ever after that, on her birthdays, as regular as clockwork, Mary received a bouquet of roses, and if they took the last dime of the funds George happened to have in his pocket. Every time on a little card, pinned to the flowers, he would write "From your unworthy husband, George." And he meant it. He still means it to-day. "A pastor's wife," he says, "can be one of two things — a sad mistake or the greatest woman that lives."

A happy hour indeed came when the congregation presented George and his family with a piano.

"It's only a cheap, second-hand one," said Peter Closs to his wife Lena, "but it's a pretty good one yet, and we thought he'd like to have those little girls of his learn music. They sing so pretty, you know."

The peculiar thing was that neither George nor Mary ever even suspected that it was second-hand, so completely had it been overhauled and burnished.

One of those winters, George took a bad cold, one that settled in his chest and put him into bed for a week or two. It was a small matter and did no more than give him a bit of physical inconvenience, but it caused Mary's eyes to show for a while the anxiety that was in her heart. But he received a score of visitors, church-members who showed deep concern for him, and finally, when he rose from his bed, Mary had a big surprise for him.

"It's in the study," she said.

He went in and looked in amazement at his desk. On it stood a row of books, an edition he had always wished

to have, but which he believed he would never be able to acquire. On the side lay a card explaining their presence there on his desk. George read it with eyes that grew softer and softer by degrees and at last contained some happy moisture.

"Well, well!" he burst out.

On the card was written: —

> To our pastor, whom we appreciate and who always works for our best interests.
>
> The Young People's Society.

CHAPTER XIII.

A FINE MINISTER.

Along the pretty streets of the little town of Iota, George Willing walked with his mind full of thoughts concerning its people.

A lawyer can generally give all his inspiration and energy to a single case. George was a counsel, too, but a counsel in things spiritual, and he could not limit his advice to one quarter, for he had many cases.

In giving advice, he faced his task squarely. Like a good soldier, he was fair, and he never flinched. Nor did he ever flatter to gain an advantage. His terms, wherever a righteous battle was involved, were surrender.

"If I should sway," he often told himself, "if I should vacillate, I wouldn't be true. Right is right, wrong is wrong. There can be no medium. The Lord's will is clearly written in His Word. I will follow that and teach my people to follow it also."

So the people knew him — a real Christian minister, not just a handsome ornament of society or sentiment. Zeal of his kind did not strain the muscles exactly, but it gnawed very gradually on the mind. He had plenty of physical strength. His six feet of flesh and bone stood up as straight as an arrow, his weight increased, the firmness of his jaw told of the strong grip he possessed on himself. Only in the tiny lines gathering on his brow and in the graying hair at his temples could on detect the effects of the wear which his office put upon him.

So he strode along the streets of Iota a handsome figure, with the eyes of the town always upon him.

"There goes Pastor Willing," some would say. "A fine man and a hard, sincere worker."

Others would say, "He may be all right, but in some things he's entirely too firm. If he'd know what's good for him, he'd give in a little in some places." They were thinking particularly of his unflinching stand in the treatment of the Twack-Sass feud, in which he seemed harsh and relentless, and also in the case of Mrs. Preismeyer, who fairly hated him because he had convinced her that she had a stubborn, unforgiving spirit. "Just look at that jaw of his," they would say. "He could bite the head off a nail."

If these people could have viewed George of an evening sitting with his three little girls around him and his little son on his knee, their criticism would have been less severe. If they could have heard him when he spoke to those little ones, telling them stories or showing them how to play the piano, and always, in everything, teaching them how to be obedient and good, they would have said something regarding his great tenderness and sincerity.

George knew that the public eye was ever upon him, and he tried as best he could to live above reproach. His frequent spurts of anger he confined to his own private moments; his frequent weariness and drooping was never seen by any one, not even by his wife. So he always seemed the model. For that he was called names by certain of those who couldn't say too often that they didn't believe in religion and in ministers.

"Old Hickory" Dant was one of the worst of these. Because of his great age, George went to see him often, even though he had never been a church-member. And he didn't beat about the bush a single moment.

"Getting old," he told him. "All kinds of physical troubles, and growing worse every day. For you this life will soon be over, Mr. Dant. And still you make fun of the life to come."

"Sit down, Pastor," invited Dant. "I ain't worried so

much about that coming life. What I'm worried about is how to make this one I got last as long as possible." He coughed and touched his chest and laughed a dry little cackle.

"Why?" George asked bluntly. "Why should you want to live as long as possible?"

"Well, to keep myself from dyin', I guess."

"Are you so afraid to die?"

"No, I guess not, I guess not. When my time comes, I'll go just as smooth as the rest of 'em."

"It'll not be so smooth for you, Mr. Dant. In every man's heart since his birth is something that tells him that there is a God, a God who made him. You've been snuffing yours out, but it'll come back to you when you die, if only in the very last minute. And then you'll despair."

"That's where you and I think different, Pastor."

"How do you know, Mr. Dant? You havn't looked death in the face yet."

"Well, I'm not afraid of it, Pastor Willing!"

George sat down and looked slowly around in the room. "Mr. Dant," he asked, "what's that up there on the shelf — those bottles?"

"Medicine."

"What's it for?"

"Me.. For my health."

"Oh, then you believe in medicine for sickness. Strong medicine, with power in it. Believe me, your soul is sick, too, Mr. Dant. Mighty sick. It's paralyzed. It needs medicine — medicine with a great power in it."

"No, never mind, Pastor. Never mind that," interrupted the old man, laughing, his hand raised.

George sighed to himself.

"Look at those trees out there, Mr. Dant. How did they get there?"

"I planted 'em. Twenty years ago. Fine trees, ain't they?"

"Wonderful trees. Did you make them grow, too?"

"No, sir, I didn't."

"Who did?"

"Well — they just got the power to grow from out of the ground, I guess."

"So you guess there's power in the ground, do you?"

"O yes." Warily "Old Hickory" stroked his chin. "O yes, Pastor."

"Yes. And there's power in the sky, too. And in the clouds and in the rain they gave to those trees. And there's power in the trees themselves and in your hands, the hands that planted those trees twenty years ago. From where does all this power come, Mr. Dant?"

Mr. Dant shifted slightly in his chair. "From where, you say?" he repeated the question.

"Yes, from where?"

"Well, who knows?"

"I'll tell you. From God. From where else could it come? It's His power.

"Sure. I knew that was coming, Pastor."

"Well, it's the only answer. Can you give a different one? Think it over. Be fair with yourself. Can't you see how blind you are? The light shines in your face, and you close your eyes."

Old Mr. Dant looked at his clock. "It's time for my medicine," he said, changing the subject. He wanted to rise, but George restrained him.

Quietly he took the bottle from the shelf, poured the liquid into a spoon, and gave it to the old fellow. "I wish," he said slowly, "you could learn to believe in God as you've learned to believe in this medicine, Mr. Dant. You can't even see the power in this bottle, yet you believe in it. You

can see the Power of God all around you, but you deny that."

That was one of the things George had to deal with — blindness. And self-righteousness was another.

In the outskirts of Iota lived a family called Michaelson. They were people of some little education and therefore liked to see George, who was educated, come to see them. But they could never see the reason for having a church or attending it.

"We just try to do our very best in our life," claimed Mrs. Michaelson, who was both handsome and proud. "As long as a person lives as good as he can, it's the most he can do. Isn't it?"

George told a little story in return for that.

A man sits in a prison. Around him are walls of stone and bars of iron. Daily he tries his very best to get out and regain his freedom. Does he ever succeed? Why not? Because there are things stronger than he holding him powerless. How, then, can he obtain freedom? By calling upon some one who has the power to unlock those barred doors for him. Heaven is beyond our mortal grasp, because sin locks us in. The very best that we can do is never enough to open those doors. Only Jesus Christ can open the door of heaven for us.

"But are we so powerless?" asked the grown daughter of the Michaelsons, a very beautiful girl indeed, but quite as proud as her mother. "I can feel the good in my heart; you know what I mean — the will to do what's right."

"Do you feel the will to do evil, too?" George asked her levelly.

She looked at him. "Yes, once in a while," she admitted.

"Well, then your heart must be both good and evil," he said. "Good and evil are two opposite things. How is that possible?"

Young Miss Michaelson considered it evenly, groping for some suitable answer. She was too clever to fall into the trap into which her mother fell at once by answering, "Why, that's very simple, Reverend Willing. Sometimes the heart is good, and sometimes it's bad."

Now George couldn't help laughing just a little.

"Pardon me for asking, but have you an apple in the house?" he said.

"Why, yes." Mrs. Michaelson darted a puzzled look at him and hurried toward the kitchen.

"A good one, please," George called after her.

She brought in a beautiful, very sound one and handed it to George.

"Thank you. That's certainly a good apple, Mrs. Michaelson. It's good all over. There's not a speck of bad in it just now. But when it becomes just a little bit rotten, Mrs. Michaelson, can it ever be good again?"

At that young Miss Michaelson burst into bright laughter. Her mother wholly confused, said, "Oh, I know that our heart isn't perfect altogether."

"What you mean," he said, "is that it's basically bad, inclined to do evil."

She hesitated. "Oh, I wouldn't say that. We can try to be good, can't we?"

Slowly George smiled.

"This apple," he answered, "once it becomes bad, cannot try to become good again. On the contrary, it tries as hard as it can to become more rotten. In fact it does."

Then Mrs. Michaelson, at her wit's end, said a foolish thing: "Well, but our heart isn't an apple," at which her pretty daughter fairly roared, and George thought to himself, "Better an apple than a stone."

Then he sobered completely.

"The truth is, Mrs. Michaelson, since the coming of sin

into the world the human heart is bad, and since it is bad, it does not and cannot of itself try to be good. Doing good is only accomplished by the help of God, who can change the heart and make it do things it isn't inclined to do. In no way, then, can we be good except through the merits of our Savior, who, if we believe in Him, takes the sin out of our heart. We must be Christians, worshipers of God, believers in Christ, sincere churchgoers." He smiled.

Mrs. Michaelson sat down and placed her hand gracefully under her chin. She drew a long breath.

"Well," she inquired, "but what about those people who are not Christians, who do a lot of good, you know? Charity, I mean."

"Yes," put in Miss Michaelson quickly. "What about that, Pastor Willing? Take, for instance, some rich man who never goes to a church. If he gives, say, a million dollars or so to the poor. What do we call that?"

"We call it good," confessed George pleasantly.

"Well?" she said sweetly, waiting.

He continued. "The question is not, 'What do *we* call it?' The question is, 'What does *God* call it?' He made us, put us into this world, told us to obey His will. It is *He* who must be pleased, not *we*."

"Well, what do you think God calls it, then? Bad? If a man does charity like that?"

He shot the same question back. "What do you think God calls it? Think it over carefully, Miss Michaelson. He created this rich man, gave him life, strength, intelligence, and so, of course, the opportunity to make all his money. For that the rich man never believed in Him; he perhaps even mocked Him. Now he condescends to give a million of the money God gave him to the poor. Is God pleased?"

"Well, of course not, if it's put the way you put it."

"How else could it be put, Miss Michaelson? If I have a servant who really hates me, but who nevertheless sweeps my sidewalk just to show how generous he is or how good he can sweep, am I pleased with that servant?"

There could be no argument about that. Pretty Miss Michaelson said nothing.

"You see,' said George, rising, with the apple in his hand, a true Christian pleases God, first and always, and he never pleases other men or himself. And we can't please God in any other way than by first admitting that He is our Lord and Maker and that because of sin we are nothing before Him, yea, that we have deserved His wrath and punishment. Only by His own power can we serve Him and do in our life what's right."

He laid the apple on the table.

"No, keep it," urged Mrs. Michaelson. "Give it to your little Ruthie. I think she's the sweetest child! And just wait, I'll get some more for the others, too. They're such wonderful little ones."

"Thank you," said George, as he was being loaded down with the apples, "thank you so much, Mrs. Michaelson. And I hope to see you and your daughter in our church soon. And your husband, too."

"Well, we might drop around some time," was the answer to that.

Among his real members George's work was easier and more pleasant. There were many visits to make, on the average some twelve to fifteen a week. And still there were people in Iota who thought the pastor's only job was to preach once every Sunday morning in the church and that the rest of the week he enjoyed a vacation.

Old Wiltman, for instance, expected to hear that Sunday sermon read to him every week. So did Mother Press, who lived 'way out on the farm — a long hour's walk for

the pastor to make. There were several others like these, but George didn't mind it. He loved to give the saving truth to willing ears even though it strained his voice somewhat to read in a steady flow of words for a length of time.

Then, all the emergency cases that turned up. Sicknesses, accidents, births, baptisms, funerals, weddings, family squabbles, fights and feuds such as the Twacks and the Sasses, admonishments of all kinds, requested and unrequested, occasions for well-meant advice, private instructions, and others.

It was in every respect different from what Sunken Hollow had been. On certain evenings after a particularly stressful day, when his nerves were on edge, he would go into his study and close the door, hiding himself from everybody and submit to a secret thought that would come. "Oh, how I should like to be back among those fair fields and forests of Sunken Hollow, where there was peace!"

But with his nerves quieted by rest, strength would come back and with it deep shame for such a moment of weakening. He would stand up and accuse himself.

"Bah, you are a fine minister! Sitting down with your six-foot frame like a weak woman and feeling sorry for yourself. Be thankful your people don't know the coward that you are. And what about God, who sent you out and who stands behind you every moment? What a disappointment you must be to Him! Get out there, kiss your wife and your four pretty children, go on with your work, and realize that you are nothing but fortunate. Go on!"

CHAPTER XIV.

DOCTOR — LAWYER — COLLECTOR.

In Iota, because George Willing was so busy, the years passed with great speed. Each one brought new pleasures and new problems. In the period ranging from his coming to Iota up to his fifth year he wrote many an interesting page into his diary. No longer could he make daily entries, however. On Monday mornings he usually wrote down the history for the week.

Of many matters we shall give only a few and of those few only the briefest details.

In his home his family was well enough, all except Mary. Her nerves were too highly strung for her to stand up under the pressing pace of things, and so there were many times when she complained of feeling bad.

"Why, dear," George would tell her with tenderness, "you look just as young and beautiful as you did when we were married in Sunken Hollow fourteen years ago."

She really did. The fact that her nervous system was weak did not show on her face. Some small lines were beginning to be noticeable, but George always said that they were only "character lines" and that they only made her face so much sweeter and more lovable to him.

"Oh, if we only wouldn't have to put up with that constant battle of making ends meet!" she would confess suddenly at times, baring the real reason for most of her trouble. "It drains me, George. If the congregation could only raise your salary just a little bit." And under a nervous strain she would become abruptly angry. "They've all got their houses and savings. And they expect us to get along on about half of what a family like ours really needs. It's not fair!"

"O Mary," he would say gently, "you're only a little low in spirit just now. You'll feel better again. We'll try to figure out new ways of economizing as soon as I get a little extra time. Meanwhile cheer up!"

Most of the time she was cheerful. She knew that her mother had bravely fought that same battle in Bitter Point for more than a quarter of a century. That thought constantly gave her encouragement.

George's children were growing rapidly. His three girls were pretty things, all small of feature and figure like their mother. Mary at thirteen was through with school. She proved a great help in the house. Helen and Ruthie still attended classes. All three could play the piano, thanks to George's patient labors with them. John, at eight years, was a strong boy, promising to grow up into a giant like his father. He had good intelligence, but he liked all kinds of mischief, and often very firm measures were necessary in his training.

It was during George's eighth year in Iota that his wife gave him another little daughter. It almost cost Mary her life. A whole long night she lay at the door of death, while George, sitting at her bed, fought silently with black despair. She was finally moved to the hospital some eighteen miles away in the city, where the baby was born. And after three weeks Mary could come home. It was just like starting all things over, that day when George knew that Mary would come back again into the parsonage, which had seemed so desolate without her.

The new little girl was named Betty. All the anxiety and work she caused she amply repaid by her sweet, smiling nature. Of all his children George soon began to love her the most. One thing that puzzled them all as time went on was the infant's hair.

"It's very evident," George told his wife one day, "that our Betty is going to be a redhead."

"I can't understand it," Mary confessed. "Nobody in both our families ever had red hair. It's altogether out of line."

"What I can't understand," he returned, "is that sweet nature of hers along with the red hair. Those two things, you know, usually don't go together."

Mary smiled at him. "Well, do you suppose we've got a very unusual child, George?"

"Well, I know it," he returned with certainty. For him all his children were unusual.

When his mind was not on his family, it was on the many matters concerning his church. The things that traveled a smooth course in congregational life gave him no strain. But the inevitable troubles, the ripples in a smooth sea, and often the surging waves of a storm drew on his reserve power.

There was, for instance, that perennial matter of the Twacks and the Sasses. Five years he had labored with, as far as he could see, only a slight effect. He had brought them to the point of assuring each other again and again that they were really not enemies, but only preferred each to mind her own business.

"Very well," George said at last. "Now keep this promise. Mind your own business. The whole trouble between you is this, that you always have minded each other's business. Am I right?"

Neither would answer, but silence was admission enough. "The point is," George went on, "that to live as enemies, to hate each other, is just the opposite of being a Christian. How can you stand there in church and pray, 'Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us'? Why, that's saying one thing and meaning

another! And remember this, to smile at each other, act like friends, and underneath still to envy and hate each other, that's even worse. I hope that you'll let Jesus into your heart and study Him and keep Him there. If He's there, you'll have no room left for jealousy and hate."

As for Mrs. Preismeyer, she was quite hopeless. George had given her up as such. Once in a while he still went there, but his knock on the door was never answered. Once he had caught her peering through the curtains of a side window as he left. After that he tried no more.

Troubles came in all different kinds. One church-member became intoxicated regularly and took to beating his wife. She would ask George after every beating to please come to the house. He always went, and every time the wife-beater repented and shed a flood of tears. But the beatings would go on just the same. George soon found out that the affair had two sides, that the wife was partly at fault, and put the whole thing down as a joint sin of weakness, which had to be carried along.

There were disputes concerning titles and property. George usually informed the people that these were cases for a lawyer, not for a minister. But there always was some phase into which the principles of Christianity entered, and he felt obliged to give testimony to the truth.

Once George made the mistake of innocently telling some one that half a raw potato tied to a painful boil overnight would bring it quickly to a head. Thereafter he was often called and asked for all kinds of medical advice. Did he know what caused hives and what was a good cure for them? How could one prevent periodic headaches? Did lemons really cure rheumatism? What was colitis? Could he say what made an ingrown toe-nail grow in, and how could it be made to grow out again?

There lived one man in Iota who was subject to fre-

quent spells of wild raving. No doctor could help him. Then it was found that a visit from the pastor and a religious talk and a prayer could quiet his nerves. George held this choice position of alienist and doctor and preacher as long as he was in Iota, but never once was he offered a fee. He felt repaid, however, when he induced the man to become a church-member and his wife also.

Not all the uneven things that happened can be mentioned, of course. Once George had trouble even in his own family. His son John came home from school one afternoon with a horribly black eye.

"Boy," cried his father, "what happened? That's a terrible eye."

John answered vaingloriously. "You ought to see the other boy's eye."

Instantly George set his jaw and grew serious.

"Come here, sonny," he commanded.

John came stubbornly.

"Who is the other boy?"

"Joe Hanson. He kicked me first."

Joe Hanson was the son of a church deacon. And Deacon Hanson had an irascible temper. There would be consequences to this.

George gave his son a serious talk about "hurting and harming our neighbor." He gave him a sound licking, too. But that, of course, didn't help the deacon's temper.

Mr. Hanson came over that evening with a sting ready on his tongue.

"If the minister can't make his own children behave, how does he expect anybody to behave?" he shot out without even a preliminary greeting.

"Sit down, Mr. Hanson," said George, smiling affably. "To become angry in a case like this is quite the easiest thing to do. Let's exert our strength and keep cool. John

has already acknowledged his wrong and received his punishment. What have you done with Joe?"

"Not a thing. Why should I? It was all your boy's fault."

"Oh, it was? Well, if that's the case, then Joe certainly doesn't deserve any punishment. How do you know it was all my boy's fault?"

"Joe told me."

"Oh! You asked Joe about it."

"He wouldn't lie. That boy of mine — he doesn't lie."

"Neither does my boy, as a rule," said George. "And my boy said that it was Joe's fault."

"What! He did, eh?" Mr. Hanson leaped to his feet. "Say, listen, Pastor, I —"

But George raised his hand, restraining him.

"We can't argue on this, Mr. Hanson, because we really don't know a thing about it. Do we, now? Let's get both the boys in. Come back to-morrow night and bring Joe along."

So the two boys appeared together on the carpet in the pastor's study the next evening. After some cross-examination Joe Hanson finally burst into tears and admitted that he had kicked John first, just to be kicking some one.

In silence George looked up at the deacon.

"Well," cried the deacon in great surprise, "that's the first time my boy ever told me a lie."

George laughed and whispered to him, "Well, if it is, it probably won't be the last time, Mr. Hanson. You see we are all weak human beings." And to Joe he said, "Now, Joe, you know you did wrong, and I want you to come in here to-morrow after school and tell me how you feel about it. Will you do that, Joe?"

"Yes, sir."

"All right. And now let's forget the whole affair."

It was quickly forgotten.

Something rather unpleasant happened that Christmas, and it concerned little Ruthie. She was just ten years old, and she was very bright. Because George had spent much time with her, she happened to be able both to speak and sing well. So Mr. Kay made liberal use of her talents in his children's program.

In the congregation there was a certain lady who loved her children as much as George loved his. Her love for them was so great that it made her do a stupid thing.

She went to the pastor's house just to ask a question, as she put it. Mary happened to be home alone, and it was a pity that the lady had to ask it of her.

"Why is it that the pastor's children always have to be first in everything? Are they any better than anybody else?"

Poor Mary was stunned. "Why, no," she said. "What has happened?"

"Well, in the program for Christmas your Ruthie is going to speak once and sing twice, and my Clara hasn't got a single thing except just one tiny question to answer."

"Oh," cried Mary. "Why I'm so sorry! But you'll have to speak this over with Mr. Kay. I have nothing to do with the Christmas program, you know."

"Well, maybe you haven't, Mrs. Willing. But I tell you I'm just getting tired of how the minister's children are always pushed forward. I'll tell you straight out. If it keeps on, I'm going to make trouble; see if I don't. Ministers aren't any better than other people, — maybe they think they are, going around the way they do. But they aren't. There! I said it! Good-by!"

When George came home, he found his wife lying on the sofa, white and trembling, all unstrung. For his anxious questions she only gave the one answer that her

nerves were not so well to-day. She never told him what had occurred until years later.

One of the most unpleasant things that happened in those eight years concerned the matter of funds in the church. Wherever there is real heartache in this world, nine times out of ten it has for one of its main reasons either the lack or the abundance of money. In this case it was the lack.

The parsonage had at last come in for its badly needed repairs, and there had been other expenses, and so the church treasury was sadly depleted. That monster *Deficit* arose and entered the business meetings of the congregation. He sat there and watched their vain deliberations and laughed at their futile suggestions.

Peter Closs, rising in sudden anger, cried: "The only way to make up a deficit is for every one to go down in his pockets and bring up the money. Was there ever any other way? Money pays debts, not talk. We can't get anywhere by feeling sorry for ourselves or trying to protect our own pocket-book. We've got to collect. You hear that? — collect!"

So it was decided that the pastor should visit the homes of church-members and obtain private subscriptions to build up the shrunken treasury. They could not have asked anything more disagreeable of George than to go around and collect the money for his own salary. But he did it, simply because they had asked him to do it.

The experiences made during the collection trip he has not even written down into his diary. But in his memory they are fast, and in some particularly bitter moment they still bob up as vividly as ever to torment him.

The people of Iota were not like the farmers of Sunken Hollow. While those farmers had believed in saving, these people believed in spending, — but not for the church.

They had money for everything except for the collection plate. It was up to George, as their minister, to call their attention to their error. In doing that, he touched many sore spots, trod on many tender corns, and perhaps only his being a minister saved him frequently from being kicked down the front steps. Two weeks of such torture, and he had lost twelve pounds in weight.

It must be said that there were such people as would contribute willingly. Generally these were the kind who could afford it the least and upon whom it really worked a small hardship.

In a special Sunday meeting some time later George rose and reported the following: —

"It seems to be a bad moment for most people to increase their gifts to God. Hard times, I believe. There have been some brave souls who have made gifts, and I know they have done their best. But in general the canvass has been unsuccessful."

Talk broke forth, much talk. Some made their words effective by pledging to pay a certain amount.

George also pledged. He said, "I believe it will be possible for me to spare my salary for one month for the treasury. I think it can be next month. I'll let the treasurer know as soon as I determine when we can spare it."

It stunned the whole meeting for a moment. Silence reigned — and shame. Then almost all shook their heads. Impossible! A joke! Of something like that they would not hear. But George's face showed nothing if not sincerity.

Peter Closs jumped up and shouted very passionately, "We don't want no church, brothers. We really don't. Let's lock the doors. When it comes to a point where a minister offers to pay for himself, I say, lock it up."

George explained then.

"Perhaps my offer came a bit suddenly, and it may seem queer, too. You all understand, of course, I wouldn't make it if it weren't for this unfortunate deficit and all the other expenses the church has had this year. It's just — this condition. My family will not suffer. God will take care of us."

Of course, the congregation refused the offer. It did more. It came to some striking decisions. It sent four of its deacons out to collect, and to do it thoroughly, and each one of these deacons told the people the story of how the minister had offered to donate his salary for a whole month because of the deficit.

That helped. Shame has power, especially if it is based on the realization of guilt. The people saw their faults. The money soon came in, and the deficit was snuffed out unmercifully.

When Mary heard the story about George through others, — her neighbor, Mrs. Mitchell, was one, — she went to him in his study and set her hands to his shoulders and talked to him.

"You inconsiderate man! How can you make such an offer? What about your family, your five children — your little baby? Tell me, how would we have lived?"

George confessed.

"Perhaps I shouldn't have done it, Mary. But in that moment when I made the offer, I was just thinking of the money we had laid by for John's study —"

"What? My inheritance! John's money! To be used for the household!"

"I'm sorry," he said. "I see it — now. It was — the condition. The congregation was really — in a fix, Mary."

"O George!"

First she wanted to sit down and cry, then she changed her mind and scolded him soundly. Her temper flared.

For the first time in her life, under the tension of her nerves, her words burned and seared, even insulted him.

"You're too soft with the people," she cried hotly. "Be hard once or twice at least. Tell them what you want and expect. They take advantage of your softness. Be a real man! Don't stand for it. Clench your fist and fly into them — just once."

He turned away from her and sat with his chin in his hands for a time in silence. As much as the words hurt, he replied nothing. Mary, watching him, cooled quickly.

"If I were hard, Mary," he said slowly at last, "what would I achieve? Oh, I could be hard. Often my blood boils up high in me. But I contain myself with all the powers at my command. I bite my lips. Why? — I'm a minister. I try to make people see and understand their faults. I don't get a horsewhip and lash them into line. Perhaps we could get their money that way, but could we get their hearts? It's their hearts we're after." He looked up. "Mary, don't you understand?"

She relented at once and sat down at his side and rubbed her face tenderly against his.

"Yes, I understand," she murmured, her eyes filling with tears. "Sweetheart, don't take to heart what I just said. I didn't mean it. Oh, I get so angry sometimes — I just couldn't help it. I didn't really mean it, George."

"No, I know you didn't," he said.

CHAPTER XV.

A SAD CASE.

Since the world began, there has been something in the nature of beggars that makes them love ministers. A beggar, on entering a town, will first of all seek out his best friend, the minister. The door of the parsonage in Iota was the goal of many a dusty pilgrimage. And no beggar, regardless of how dirty or even drunk, ever knocked on that panel in vain.

As little as George received, still less he could keep. Though his funds did not reach to supply his own family, he always managed to conjure up something for every unfortunate wanderer or boomer. On the fence-post in front of the parsonage three little crosses were drawn in blue chalk. That was the sign in the hieroglyphics of bums that here lived a minister whose soft heart and sometimes rather incredible love for his neighbor made him an easy mark.

"I've watched them often," Mary told George in irony. "You give them a dime or a quarter and a talk on Christianity, and they make a long, holy face. Then they go right around the corner and into the saloon."

"All of them?" asked George.

"Well, most of them," she said.

"And the others that don't, Mary, what becomes of them?"

"Nobody knows."

"Well, let's put the best construction on it. They perhaps get a new start and remember what I told them and go to some church somewhere later."

"I wonder," she doubted.

"But, Mary, don't forget that God's Word always has almighty power. Even if a man remains a lazy-bone and

a beggar all his life, that word of God I spoke to him may come back to him, if not sooner, then in his very last hour. It's almighty, don't forget. I'm willing to pay a dime or a quarter any time for the privilege of telling a man that."

George soon changed his habit, however, of simply giving away money. He gave beggars a wholesome meal. And he generally held a pile of unchopped wood in the back yard in readiness. Then, when a beggar called, he would hand him an ax first and show him the pile.

"Just to work up a good appetite," he would explain genially.

He was surprised to find how that little thing cut down the number of beggars. And he noticed, too, one day that on the fence-post an additional sign had been made. Neat circles had been drawn around those three little crosses. What that meant was clear.

Most of the beggars were men. But one day, when George had been in Iota some nine or ten years, a woman came, a very young woman, no more than a girl, and in her wan face there was a story which we shall relate because of its point. She wished to borrow some money. She seemed desperate.

George asked her to come in and put a few questions. He saw her grow whiter and whiter by degrees. She was very weak. He rose at once and called his wife.

"What you need first is a good meal, young woman."

At the word "meal" the girl suddenly pitched forward to the floor in a dead faint. She hadn't eaten for days. George and Mary, alarmed, worked over her. This was a new experience altogether. Finally they brought her to and laid her on the couch.

"You poor thing!" said Mary, stroking her pale fore-

head. "You're hungry. It's weakened you. We'll fix that."

"I want to die," said the girl colorlessly. "I — I can't go on."

"Oh, don't say such things," cried Mary, dismayed. And she glanced up at George, who was standing off a bit intently studying the girl.

"Mary," he whispered in the kitchen a moment later, "something has happened to her. We must help — if we can."

"What can we do?"

"Make her tell her story. You're a woman. Get her to confide in you."

"I'll try," Mary promised.

When the girl had eaten, she felt stronger. She thanked Mary and wished to leave at once. But Mary held her with gentle insistence. It was a long time, however, before she would tell anything. At last she told her story, her eyes swimming in tears.

She was motherless; her father was a drunkard and a brute. She had kept house for him, had naturally begun to abhor it; he had been cruel; he had beaten her; she had left him. A struggle. A friend in the form of a nice young man who told her how sorry he was for her. And he promised surely to marry her. A moment of temptation. Sin. The nice young man absent without a forwarding address. She a ward of the state, an unmarried mother. The baby had died. She had wandered, wandered —.

Pastor Willing could do two things in this pitiful case. He could say, "Well, I'm sorry. I sympathize with you, I'll pray for you. But you must realize that this is a very delicate situation. This may come out. People will talk. I think I'd better give you some money, and you had better go somewhere else."

To which the despairing woman might have asked, "Where shall I go?"

The other thing he could do was to try, with help from above, to salvage this wreck. He remembered his Master standing there and saying, "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her."

The girl was saying in a truly pathetic way, "Oh, if I could only stay in some small town and get a job and start all over. Some place where they don't know me — a place like this. Oh, I'd work my hands off, and I'd always try to do what's right, and I'd go to church and —"

"We'll help you," said George, not hesitating a moment.

He first found a boarding-place for the girl and then a position. The position was obtained through a certain young man who had come to Iota only a year before and had started a little tin-shop. George had met this young man, who had the ordinary name of Smith, talked to him, and was now instructing him in religion. He was attending church.

Young Mr. Smith found a position for the girl without asking many questions. She began to work in the office of a husky coal-dealer. And on Sundays she came to George's church.

The quick change noticed in her seemed quite marvelous. She was really a very pretty girl, and, being quite happy again, she presented a bright youthful picture. George and Mary were both thrilled to see how she rapidly advanced.

Her coming to church caused some discussion among the people. Who was that pretty girl? Where did she come from — all of a sudden and alone? How did Mr. Smith get to know her?

Young Mr. Smith became her good friend. They were

often seen together. So everything went on well for more than six months.

Then a crash came.

George received first knowledge of it from the burly coal-dealer, who came to him in a frightful rave one evening. He had a pathetic little note in his hand, which was addressed to Mr. Smith.

"Don't try to find me. Things just can't be for me in Iota. I've got to move again. I can't face it. Please tell Rev. Willing I'll never forget what he did for me. I'm strong now, I'm never going to lose courage again. I'm going to pray every day to God that He'll let me find a place some day where people won't talk about me. Good-by, Mr. Smith. You were good to me. God bless you! . . ."

The coal-dealer, beside himself, pointed a big, quivering finger at George.

"It's a member of your church that started the dirty work and a lot of your church people that did some of the talking, too! I don't go to church, and I tell you I'd never want to sit in the same pew with a bunch of snakes in the grass like that!"

It all struck George like a thunderbolt. His tongue felt lame; for a moment he could not speak. Then he said, dully, "Why this is the first time I even knew that anything was wrong. Tell me what has happened. Sit down."

The coal-dealer sat down and continued.

"We suspected all the time, Smith and me, what kind of things she'd been through, that girl. But she was a good girl, and she wanted to do what was right. So we helped her, and we said nothing. Somebody else did all the saying. And I know who started it. It was that woman that goes to your church every Sunday with a

Bible and a song-book under her arm, that Mrs. Beek. I could grab her by the throat and —"

"Wait," interrupted George quickly, "do you know this? Are you sure?"

"Sure! Why, I went over to that old hen myself last night and told her plenty. And she admitted it! You know what she said to me?" He rose and gave an exaggerated imitation of Mrs. Beek: " 'Of course, you being a man without any church connections whatsoever, can't understand that we can't put up with such kind of girls in Iota. I wouldn't want my daughters to meet her, much less make friends with her. She's dangerous!' That's what she said to me."

He continued hotly: "And I asked her, 'What was wrong with this girl? What do you know?' and she answered, 'Why, are you men so stupid that you can't even tell a type? That girl has something to hide. Everybody could see that. Did she ever tell anybody anything of her past? No, she didn't. Well!' "

"That's all she said?" asked George, heavy of heart.

"That's all. That Beek woman hasn't got a single proof! She went and told her daughters what she thought, and they spread it all around. The young folks in your church began to look at this girl sidewise. She heard them whisper things behind her back. And she couldn't stand it. Oh, I tell you, Smith is good and sore. He wouldn't come along with me to-night. I don't know if he cared for the girl or not, but he's mighty sore, I tell you! He said you won't ever see him in church again. Can you blame him?"

"Yes," George shot back, stung to sudden high anger. He leaped to his feet and pointed a finger. "I blame any one who tries to fasten a thing like this on to the church. This is not the fault of the church, my man! If, as you

say, certain people in the church have been talking, must you condemn the whole church? If some one in the town of Iota should lie or steal, is that the fault of the whole town? Where's your consistency? What's your idea in coming here, anyway? Why, don't you realize that in blaming the church for this thing, you're as bad a gossip as anybody? I'll not talk any more about this until I've investigated the whole thing. And I'll see Mr. Smith to-morrow. Good evening!"

It all turned out to be as "Old Hickory" Dant mockingly called it, "a fine kettle of soup." He, too, blamed the whole church, of course, for the wagging tongues of some of its members.

Young Mr. Smith was intensely bitter when George called on him the next day. He had really begun to like the girl, which made the matter so much worse.

"I'll find her," he told George, biting his lips. "I won't give up till I do. She was a fine girl, even if she did make a mistake. She was straight and sincere. I'm going to quit my tin-shop. You'll see no more of me in Iota."

George was very sorry. "But remember you must not give up your belief, Mr. Smith — what you've learned."

"I don't know." His voice was dull. "I — I don't know."

"Don't do it. Don't let the sins of some people make you waver in your belief. No one is without sin, no Christian either. Even Christians must pray the Fifth Petition every day."

Mr. Smith looked up at him and answered, "You've been preaching to these people for ten years, and still some of them will do a thing like this."

At that George stepped back as if he had received a great blow. He suddenly felt a bitter pain in his throat. His whole body turned cold. Once more he exhorted the

young man to remain a Christian, and then he went home and sat down alone in his study. He sat there with all his dark, crushing thoughts, like a beaten man. It was late in the afternoon, and the sun was going down. He watched it through the window with weary eyes. For the first time in his life he gave way completely to discouragement. His measure was full. He wanted to quit.

Mary tiptoed in. She saw his very low mood and tried to counteract with cheer.

"Why, what's the matter with my man? Not sick, are you, George?"

"Yes, very."

She laughed and touched his curly head.

"Any pain?"

"All kinds of it."

Her arm went around his neck.

"Tell me everything."

He stirred. He would not tell her what had happened. He felt too disgusted to talk. She would find it out later.

"Oh, I'm just sick at heart, Mary. I wonder sometimes — what's the use?"

"The use of what?"

"Well, of my being — what I am?"

"George! How you talk!"

"I mean it. Ten years I've preached here. What good did it do? Where are the evidences of success in my hard work?"

She grasped his shoulders and gazed into his eyes. "My big boy! You know what made me come in here? A letter came this afternoon — a wonderful letter. And it came just at the right time."

She handed him the letter, which she had already opened. It was from the present pastor in Sunken Hollow and was addressed to George.

He read: —

"Dear Brother: —

"I am writing you with regard to old Dr. John Hartman of Sunken Hollow, whom, I am sure, you very well remember. He died last week. Before he died, he called for me. I was surprised because he had never been a churchgoer. He told me that he still remembered the things which you had said to him years ago. He wanted to accept the faith, and he died as a sincere Christian. It was a wonderful case. He wanted me to tell you of it. I know this will give you joy and a new feeling of certainty that our hard work is not in vain and that we are really doing the best thing that can be done on this earth.

"With sincere greetings,

"—— ——."

The following Sunday George preached a sermon on the Scripture-text which tells of the self-righteous Pharisees who brought a fallen woman to Jesus. His words were sharp and plain. "Unless we first realize," he said, "that our own sins are as great as the sins of any sinner, there is no place for us with God."

After that service Mrs. Beek came to him. She wished to see him privately, she said. He noticed that her lips trembled beyond control. When they were alone, she sank down in a chair and cried out, "O Pastor, to-day you preached a wonderful sermon!" and then burst into a hot flood of tears.

George was quite struck. He said nothing, but simply waited.

She went on hysterically, "I want to confess, Pastor, I said some things about that girl in the coal office. She — went away; did you hear about that?"

"I heard of it," George replied.

Mrs. Beek wept more.

"It was my fault," she wailed. "I said some things. I thought other people were better than she, just like in the sermon. And now she's gone!"

"Tell me," George asked when she had become a bit more quiet, "where did you get the information you had?"

"From Mrs. Mitchell, your neighbor."

"Oh," said George, "Mrs. Mitchell." — So, he thought, Mrs. Mitchell had been doing guesswork and spreading it as fact. A case of being "neighborly"!

In sharp words George put it up to Mrs. Beek what a very deplorable thing the whole matter had caused.

"Can't I do something?" asked Mrs. Beek, red-eyed. "I'm so sorry. Oh, never in my life will I do that again, Pastor. Can't I do something? What will happen to her?"

"The girl is gone," he said. "Nothing can be done to change what has happened. You see, it's better that she isn't here any more. I have reasons to believe that she'll get along. But in instances like this, Mrs. Beek, it would be wonderful if you could think before you speak instead of speaking first and then thinking afterward and feeling sorry. Your repentance is sincere, I see that. But you can't undo the mistake. We must put it down as a sad case."

CHAPTER XVI.

NOT STOMACH — NERVES.

A dozen years in Iota. George Willing stood in front of his mirror and considered that one morning while he shaved.

Twelve years in Iota. Enough for a thick book if he should wish to put down only the things that would be of general interest. It was truly a full world, a full world in a little town, the life of a minister.

He was in the prime of his days, forty-six years old. Never given to boasting, he would not make comparisons. But considered side by side with any other man of forty-six who was not a minister, it was scarcely a matter for conjecture which of the two had undergone the most of experience — experience in the sense of overcoming things.

Twelve years in Iota had left their traces on his face. It was a face lined strongly with character and sympathy and human understanding. There were the markings of many troubles and sorrows he had suffered. Also, there were signs of the pleasures and joys, those many things which had happened in church-life that had served to give him ever greater courage and stronger personal belief in the things he had taught.

In Mary the same characteristics were evident, only the whole effect was less noticeable. Those years, with all they contained, had left her looking strangely young. Nothing could take the sweetness from her face. Her features in girlhood had been charming, but smooth with the smoothness of ignorance concerning the rugged path of life. Now they were molded by the years into those pleasing irregularities that indicate fuller appreciation and deeper knowledge. The slim little figure of her youth had assumed rounder

proportions. Already her dark hair contained little glints of gray. Always she held her head high in fine mastery over herself; only in those moments when her poor nerves gave way, by reason of great trouble or stress, did she droop.

George had a malady, too, a chronic one, a form of indigestion which generally crept upon him an hour after meals whenever his mind was too busily engaged. That naturally happened quite often. Once Mary insisted that they go together to the doctor about it.

"It's not stomach," the doctor told him, "it's nerves. It's quite natural that a preacher should have nerves." He gazed at George. "Guess we'll have to talk a little biography, Pastor. 'Nerves' are the result of a strenuous life."

"Guess we're growing old," remarked George with a genial sigh, looking at Mary.

"You shouldn't be," said the doctor, "not yet. Not at forty-six. But they say ministers grow old quickly. And I believe it. Oh, I wouldn't be a minister if they'd pay me five hundred dollars a month."

"They'd never pay a minister that," George reminded him with a slow smile and a shake of the head.

"No, that's right. Now, that's something for the nervous system. They rarely give him enough for a bare existence. That's more like it. *Hm! Yeah!* Didn't you send that boy of yours to a private school last week, — what's his name now?"

"John. Yes, we sent him to college," said Mary proudly.

"And he's to be a minister, too?"

George nodded precisely.

The doctor shook his head.

"Isn't one minister in the family enough?"

"Well," said George, "my son John is to take my place

when I drop out. You see, Doctor, it's just like with soldiers — there must be another to jump right into line when a tired or wounded one falls. I am happy that it can be a son of mine."

At that the doctor mused, gazing out of his window.

"Yes, like soldiers," he repeated dreamily, "That's what you are, you preachers — soldiers. You've got a grim battle to fight all your life against wrong and mockery, and you've got to carry on the fight while undergoing all kinds of hardships and worries. That's why you eventually come to the doctor with nerves and indigestion and all kinds of things. No, I wouldn't be a minister, not for anything!"

George laughed. But involuntarily he was thinking of the doctor's fine house and his great yard. The doctor had worked hard in his life. So had he. In material results there was quite a difference. But he put the thought away.

"Oh, it's not so bad now," he said, "as it was years ago. My oldest daughters, Mary and Helen, have their little jobs in town now and are earning something. They'll gladly help to pay John's expenses at college. And our brave little Ruthie, she stays at home and helps her mother and takes care of Betty. We're really getting along smoothly, Doctor."

The doctor looked over his glasses and sighed. "What do you call smoothly? Just getting by without making any debts, eh?"

"Well, — yes. Why not?"

"But that's poor business. Every other man, if he's not saving anything, thinks he's not getting along at all."

George smiled. "If we have food and clothing," he quoted, "let us be therewith content."

"Oh, yes," said the doctor. "But the Bible is never against saving for rainy days. What will you do when you get old and can't work?"

George raised his brows. "I'll not do anything, I suppose. I'll be quite powerless. The Lord will do everything. Isn't that so, Mary?"

He turned to her, and she smiled and nodded. But the doctor shook his head again.

"Well, you've got a fine family," he said, thinking. "Those girls of yours, they'll be of great help to you." His fingers drummed on the arms of his chair. "But they're very pretty, all of them, like their little mother here." He winked at Mary. "I'm afraid they'll get married on you. What then?"

"And they should," said Mary at once, "if they find the right man."

George and the doctor laughed heartily.

"That's a mother talking," said the doctor, shaking his finger. "Yes, and she'll sit at night working her eyes out sewing wedding-dresses, and plan and work, and work and plan. And before she'd complain of her troubles and pains, her husband would have to complain at least ten times about his. Right?"

"Right," agreed George. He rose. "Don't you know, Doctor, we ministers couldn't go on half as long as we do if it wouldn't be for our wives? They carry over half the burden."

Mary was blushing scarlet, looking very pretty in her confusion.

"Oh, now, George," she protested.

But George kept on.

"She's been the manager of my household for nearly twenty years. With our little income she did wonders. Where I would have made the clumsiest of mistakes, she showed a wisdom that is still a mystery to me. And look — now she sits there and tries to say it all isn't so."

The doctor laughed with a merry roar. They all

laughed. George and Mary drew much benefit from that visit to the doctor.

"That's it," the doctor said. "Laugh more. Laugh all the time. And play, too, throw your work overboard often and get out into the country with a basketful of sandwiches and pickles and get a round of mosquito bites and a bit of poison-ivy and play and laugh. That's all I'll prescribe for you, both of you."

Later George and Mary considered the fact levelly that during their twelve years in Iota they had done very little playing indeed. Life had been altogether too busy.

But every morning after that George conscientiously took long walks. He walked four miles. And often the whole family went out on a picnic, especially during the vacations, when John was home from college. The outskirts of Iota had pretty woods, not like those of Sunken Hollow, but simply woods. They went there often to dream away under the trees and talk. And they did everything else according to the doctor's suggestions. Sandwiches with pickles, plenty of laughter, many mosquito bites, and once little three-year-old Betty even got the poison-ivy.

And in the house, of evenings, they often continued the spirit of laughing and playing. To sit in a group around the friendly lamp on the table and tell stories was something that did the heart good. Often George would recite to them the verses he had learned in his literature studies at college. There were certain ones they requested over and over — dramatic poems, which he could do especially well and in a thrilling manner. He never tired of giving them, watching the rapt interest on their faces as they listened.

More often they all would sing together, with Mary or Helen playing the piano, folk-songs and sacred songs.

George had a way of carrying along the bass that his son John loved to hear. Always certain songs had to be included before the evening was considered complete. There was one concerning the happy home and another one speaking of the great woods, which, the girls always said, meant the wonderful woods of Sunken Hollow. There was a little round in which all sang the same words, but each began at different intervals of time. It generally ended in a mix-up of voices and a lusty scream of fun.

On such evenings no one wanted to speak first of going to bed. George would still be merry with little baby Betty snoring on his lap, and John, still just a big boy, sitting on the floor with his head against the sofa. At last when Ruth began to yawn and even Helen and Mary began to nod, their mother would draw a long sigh and say the words, "All right, everybody. It's bedtime. Almost twelve o'clock. Dear me! To-morrow another busy day!"

And George, lying back in his chair with his hand caressing Betty's little red head, would deplore, "Oh, but bedtime really comes too soon."

And little Betty would wake up suddenly and agree with him and in her childish patter register a sound protest against cutting a delightful evening short.

"She knows," George would philosophize, as he carried her off to bed. "Nothing in life is so wonderful as an evening at home with good companions."

It was really very necessary for George to find some reaction to church affairs. In the congregation, conditions were such that laughing was hardly possible. These conditions were wholly financial, as is so often the case in congregations. The monster *Deficit* had arisen again. The chief reason was that a number of people were holding back in order, some day in the near future, to buy an automobile. Automobiles were the coming thing in those days. Every-

body would have one sooner or later. Buggies, more and more, were going out of date. And so there was the deficit. The money was simply not being contributed.

"We must have a system," George told his members. "Our way of giving voluntary gifts is too uncertain."

So he introduced a new system, one just then coming into practise. It consisted of little printed envelopes, one for each Sunday, by means of which a larger yearly pledge could be paid in small weekly instalments. A very sensible, easy system.

But what a storm of dispute it caused! Some liked the idea. Some abhorred it, saying that "the church was getting to be just like a business house." Some condemned it because they saw how they could scarcely divide their small yearly gift into fifty-two tiny gifts, but would have to raise the yearly amount. Some were just simply of the stubborn kind who oppose everything new. Many refused absolutely to sign a pledge card in order that an exact budget might be made for the year.

"Too much like business!" was the cry. "This is a church!"

"Business," George told them, "is something which makes money, profits. If it doesn't make profits, it ceases to be a business. Our church is not trying to make money or profits. You know that. It is only trying to run its affairs in a sensible and sure way, so that it does not constantly make debts because of haphazard methods. Try the system for a year at least."

He led the way by taking envelopes for himself and his family and filling them with substantial weekly amounts.

After the first year there were no more complaints. People became accustomed to it. It's running on smoothly to-day in Iota.

Along with such major difficulties in George's work it was a pity that there should be certain petty arguments and small squabbles to harass him the more. We shall mention just one because it concerned his own family. After all, this is a story of George Willing and his family.

His oldest daughter Mary was a very attractive girl of eighteen or nineteen at this time. The son of one of the church-members grew very fond of her. But this young man happened to be not one to her liking, and so she avoided him consistently. This rather unpleasant pursuing-and-dodging procedure went on for some months, until Mary, tiring of it, told the young man in plain words just how she felt concerning his unwelcome attentions.

Several weeks later the young man's father, who lacked tact and perhaps a degree of sense, called on George. He deeply deplored the fact that he was compelled to make a complaint against his daughter.

"What?" cried George, surprised.

He had really known nothing of the whole affair, for Mary was a quiet, sensible girl and hadn't wanted to bother him with such things. She had told only her mother.

"She's too stuck up," burst out the boy's father, "entirely too proud. She's supposed to be meek, like you tell us to be in your sermons."

"Well," said George slowly, biting down the insult, "I've never really noticed the wrong kind of pride in Mary. But it may be, it may be. I notice she has some pride, the kind of pride that's right and good. But to be stuck up is wrong, of course. What makes you think she's stuck up, as you say?"

"She puts up her nose at my son. She won't talk to him any more."

"She won't? That's very queer of Mary. She always talked to every one. What's the reason?"

"The reason is because he wanted to be nice to her. And she wouldn't have it."

A long moment George sat thinking.

"I see," he said at last, beginning to suspect the trouble. "Well, before we talk any more, I'll see Mary about this. That's the proper thing. Don't you think so?"

The man had wound up the spring of his anger by degrees. Now it sprung loose.

"All your daughters are proud, even that sixteen-year-old one! I'm not afraid to say it. The young folks all say so. That's not the way it should be. If the minister's children are stuck up, what do you expect of others?"

George rose, smiling, but heaving a heavy sigh inwardly.

"Calm yourself," he suggested. "When a person is angry, he says things he doesn't quite mean. Have my daughters ever acted proud to you?"

"No, but —"

"Then you're repeating something you heard from some one else. I don't believe that all the young folks say this. There may be a few. And they're probably wrong. I've been watching my girls very closely, because, as their father, I'm naturally interested in them. And I'm not alarmed about their pride. They make themselves pretty dresses, and they walk straight and carry their heads high. I'm thankful for that. Oh, they may have some little vanity. But they're not proud." He sat down. "I'll tell you what — I'll continue to watch them, and as soon as I see any evidences of real pride, I assure you I'll admonish them at once."

The man began driving from a different angle.

"Your daughter Mary, she sings most of the solos in the choir, doesn't she? Why is that?"

"I'm sure I don't know. Perhaps it's because the director of the choir likes her way of singing. And he can

depend on her being regular in attending rehearsals. What has this to do with her pride?"

"And your daughter Helen acts in most of the entertainments we give."

"For that, too, Mr. Kay may have his reasons. He directs the plays." Then George touched his master complainer on the shoulder. "Now listen. I'm beginning to see things. Answer this question." He paused and fixed his glance upon the man. "Are you talking here in your son's place?"

The silence that followed said enough.

"Well," George went on, "think it over. After all, we'll let these young people do their own choosing in certain things. If we mix in, there are bound to be mistakes, and there will be unhappiness. In many matters, of course, they need adult advice. When the time for that comes, I'll give it. I'm watching."

The man went home, hardly satisfied. And George sat there, glowering a long while, holding himself with all his might. When his temper had cooled, he called in his two daughters and gently asked a favor of them.

"Mary, will you ask Mr. Kay not to give you any more solos to sing in the choir?"

Mary was surprised and shocked. She loved singing and really had an unusually good voice. She just looked at her father.

He explained.

"It's just that — it will make thing easier for me here in Iota. Do you see?"

She nodded, understanding at once. But little tears of chagrin filled her eyes. To hide them, she turned and went out.

George bit his lips hard, but managed to address his second daughter gently.

"And, Helen, will you refuse all parts in plays — for the same reason?"

Helen looked at her father.

"Why, sure," she said cheerfully. "I really think I've been in too many. But that's not my fault. I took them most times just to help out. Whenever somebody quarreled and dropped from the cast, I was supposed to take his place because I could learn the part quickly."

"I understand," said her father softly. "I don't ask this of you for any reason except — to make things easier."

When she left the room, George did what is called in expressive English "flying off the handle." His blood boiled over completely. He let himself go. Fiercely he paced the room and clenched his fists.

"Proud — those two! What a miserable calumny! Oh, what have I done to get it like this, right and left and from all sides? That man, that complainer and his son, I could grip them by both the ears and swing them around in a long, graceful circle. Why should a minister have to take a direct slap in the face? Christ took one, but He was God. I'm only a human being, and I love my daughters, and I tried to train them right, and I believe, these few jealous opinions notwithstanding, that with the help of God I've made a fair success of it —"

He stopped in the middle of his rage and sat down, checking himself.

"But perhaps," he went on half calmly, "I'm being a good bit self-righteous in my own opinion. Yes, we are weak, all of us. We can't point often enough at ourselves, even if we ourselves can see no reason for pointing."

He slipped and continued hotly again. "Minister's children are certainly in a queer position. They should give a good example. If they do not, the wickedness of all the wicked people of the church is blamed on to them.

If they do, if they are rigid and exemplary, they are looked upon as proud —"

He suddenly stopped again, took his own index finger, and pointed it at himself — a foolish gesture. But it checked his anger.

His two daughters did not cause trouble so much longer. In the course of those years there was a convention of ministers in Iota. In that company were two young divines, just out of the seminary, who felt quite lost among their older and more experienced brethren. George felt sorry for them and invited them to his home. They repaid his hospitality by taking his daughters.

Mary was married not quite two years after the incident just related and Helen a year later. Both husbands were stalwart fellows like their father-in-law, George. Mary and Helen Willing are minister's wives to-day, carrying on the brave tradition of their mother, of whom they learned how to live and endure that particular kind of life.

Ruth, at nineteen, said she never would marry and leave home.

"It's because I'll never find a man I can love as much as my father," she explained. "He's my only sweetheart."

George took her in his arms for that.

"It's a great honor," he said, looking down at her, never believing that she wouldn't receive a dozen offers of marriage.

But he was unable to look into the future.

CHAPTER XVII.

ANNIVERSARY.

The church was filled with the people of Iota, and Peter Closs, the good old deacon, was speaking. Speaking in public always gave him trouble, especially on a warm September evening. He perspired freely as he addressed his remarks to Pastor George Willing, who sat in a front pew, with Mary at his side and all his children grouped around him.

Every one in that entire assembly wore a thoroughly happy expression. George himself was serious in a way, yet smiling. Mary, beaming, looked very proud of him. Behind them sat John, grown quite tall and strong now, a regular young man with a husky voice, and Ruth, looking very pretty and elated, and red-haired Betty, just eight and promising to become, despite her freckles, the fairest of all of George's children.

Near by sat the married daughters, Mary and Helen, with their chubby babies, George's first grandchildren, who both showed their ignorance by making all kinds of loud noises at this occasion. Next to them sat old Teacher Meller of Bitter Point and his wife. And at their side was a true old friend of George Willing — none other than Mrs. Stark, of Sunken Hollow.

Mrs. Stark, stouter than ever and more short of breath, was weeping and laughing at the same time. Mr. Meller, looking old and feeble indeed, — he was past seventy, — smiled broadly, and so did his wife.

A grand occasion. One that went down into George's diary in glowing words, never to be forgotten.

Peter Closs, with considerable effort, was saying: "We are thankful to God that He let our dear pastor serve

Him for twenty-five years. We are thankful that we could have him for sixteen of those years here in Iota. We can never thank our pastor enough for what he has done for us in these sixteen years, and we hope he'll do the same for us for sixteen years more. And now, to show our thanks to our dear pastor, we make him a little gift, — just to show our appreciation."

He handed George a leather purse and sat down with a sigh of relief, thankful that his part was over. George rose, looking entirely overcome, and faced his people. His hands and lips were trembling slightly. He tried to muster his full voice, but it would not come. His first tone was weak. He took a long breath and started over. That helped a bit.

"This," he said, "is all a complete surprise to me. If my gratitude seems weak, it is only because I am overwhelmed by the love and consideration you are showing for your pastor. So I will say simply this, that I thank you from the bottom of my heart for everything. I humbly thank God that I was permitted to be a minister for twenty-five years and pray, if it is His will, that I may serve twenty-five years more. To work in His vineyard has always been a most precious thing to me, always *a delightful road.*"

He nodded meekly and sat down.

Into the reverential silence that followed the organ played a few powerful chords, and then the whole assembly burst into a mighty hymn of praise.

After the service came the celebration, which lasted four hours, but seemed so very short. And then, when it was over, the parsonage was the scene of another glad gathering, which lasted well into the morning.

"Ah," said old Mr. Meller to his son-in-law, "I see before me a very fortunate man. I remember I said this twenty-five years ago. His hair are turning a little gray

now in places, but he's still young. He has done fine work for twenty-five years. His good wife is still at his side, and she has given him a fine family. And twice already has he become a grandfather. Here's twenty-five years more to him!"

All clapped their hands, and George bowed, laughing.

Mrs. Stark had a little speech and a gift.

"Revner Willing," she said, nearly in tears, "it's certainly the happiest day of my life that I can be here. It's a long time since you left Sunken Hollow, but there's some of us ain't forgotten you yet. So we got together and made up this little present for you." She gave George an envelope. "Wishing you blessings and happiness and many returns."

She sat down quickly, no longer able to contain herself, and the tears burst forth in torrents.

George was immensely moved, and the room was quiet. He patted good Mrs. Stark on the shoulder.

"It's the happiest day of my life, too," he told her.

It was that. All his children together and relatives and old friends to wish him continued health and success. The only sad thought in it all was that he missed his good mother and his first little son, those two dear ones who lay side by side under green little mounds in Sunken Hollow.

A few days the golden haze of the celebration held on; then, after relatives and friends had gone, things went back to their daily routine. But the memory of that evening stayed with George and his whole family, always to be cherished.

The gifts of love he had received went to straighten out certain little bothersome matters for him. He could pay some few debts incurred by John at college, and he could buy for Mary and himself a long-needed outfit of Sunday clothes.

From the Iota congregation he had received twenty-five bright new silver dollars, one for each year in office.

"Splendid!" he had exclaimed. "For that, Mary, you are going to get that new tailored suit I always wanted you to have."

"Oh, but, George!" she protested at once. "I really don't need it. But you — you're actually getting to look shabby. The first thing we'll get is a new black suit for you, a very good one this time."

"Never mind," he returned, waving a restraining hand, "we're going to get your outfit first. That's settled. Why should you waste your beauty in threadbare things, Mary?"

"Beauty," she laughed. "George, don't forget that I'm a grandmother, and two times at that. If I ever had any beauty, it's gone now."

He stood and looked at her tenderly. "Gone?" he exclaimed softly. "Gone? Mary, it's growing greater every year." He advanced and took her face between his hands as one would do to a child. "Dear," he whispered, "to be as beautiful as you are, that never changes. Never!" And gallantly, like in those days of Sunken Hollow, he bowed his head and kissed her hair, those brown curls of twenty-five years ago which were now turning so gray.

A mist of happiness shone in her eyes.

"You," she said very softly, "you may be older, but your heart is always young, George."

Loudly he laughed and shook her. "Mary, don't talk of being old. You're just fifty, I'm a little over. What's that? Why, we're young people! The best of life is still before us."

"It's what I'm always telling you," she said, her head on his shoulder, "the best of life."

When they opened the envelope Mrs. Stark had brought

from Sunken Hollow, both stared and even grew pale in the face.

Two fifty-dollar bills! That and a little note in writing.

"It's not possible," he gasped. "It must be a mistake, Mary!"

Both sat down and gazed at each other.

"Mistake?" she echoed dreamily. Then she sighed. "Honestly, George, I do hope it isn't."

"Well, good old Mrs. Stark doesn't see so well. She may have meant them to be fives. But fifties!"

"Read the note," she suggested.

The note simply read: —

> "To our good pastor whom we won't forget, and who did so much for us, but whom we never appreciated as we should."

It was signed by several people, including the Starks, and — here George stared — also by Old Weissman and Pillhaus and Peters.

"It's not a mistake," cried Mary, and George exclaimed, "Well!" and then "Well!" again.

So much was contained in that little expression that a book could be written of its contents.

After this George and Mary appeared in new attire; she in a smart tailored suit of navy blue; he in a new suit of immaculate black and with a new hat. No two human beings could look so handsome and so happy. People who gazed at them decided that it must be an illusion.

But flies manage to slip into most every ointment. That year of his twenty-fifth anniversary seemed to be a year that carried plenty of troubles also.

A tremendous misfortune indeed was the burning of the parsonage. Fire considers no one whom it selects for a victim. It started at night from some mysterious source, and the old wood of the house burned quickly. A few

minutes after the alarm had been given the flames were already roaring. Hundreds of people helped in carrying out as many of the belongings of the Willings as could be saved in the great excitement and hurry. But much was lost. And in the end the parsonage itself was a charred heap of ruins.

It was terrible — all that in the middle of the night. To be wakened from a peaceful sleep and to undergo, half clad and shivering, all the horrors of conflagration and danger, and the added bitterness of losing things near and dear to one!

George and Mary took it as bravely as they could. As they stood there with their children in the cold night, brilliantly lighted by the flames that were swallowing their home, he noticed that she trembled violantly. But he laid it mostly to the chill in the air. His own teeth were chattering.

Among certain of those of the church who had run to the scene lament was rife.

"Well, there she goes," said one church-member. "Now, what'll we do? It's sure going to mean a lot of expense."

"All up in smoke and no insurance either," another reminded him. "O my lands! What luck!"

And another, "And just after we put electric light into that place, too. Well, that's gone. We shouldn't have done it. Who knows, maybe it's those lights that caused the fire."

Because that fire created such a long discussion in the congregation of Iota, we shall be very brief with it here.

There was much conjecture as to the cause of it. All kinds of things were said. One rumor, originated by Mrs. Preismeyer, had it that the minister had started the blaze himself in order to get a new parsonage. Such things would happen. George only laughed when he heard of it.

The Willings moved into another house, rented by the congregation for the emergency. All their savings went to purchase certain new things to replace those which had been lost.

A great dispute arose among the members as to the building of a new parsonage. Now was the time, said some. Others said the opposite. In this dispute the central object of it, George, naturally suffered.

At the same time Mary, his wife, broke down. The great excitement and the work of moving had been too much for her. Ruth, working in town, had to give up her job in order to stay home and help.

George, filled with anxiety on the one side, had all the current troubles of heated argument on the other. The fire and all the results of it constituted what is frankly called in his diary "a period of genuine misery."

To make all these matters infinitely worse, a letter arrived at that time from Bitter Point telling of Mr. Meller's sudden grave illness. Could not George come at once? it asked. He was shocked. His nerves were stretched tight.

He went to Mary's bed with the letter. She was improving. He tried to keep the truth from her.

"I'm going to make a little visit to Sunken Hollow," he said, trying to appear casual.

"A visit?" she asked wide-eyed. "But why?" And then, anxiously, "What has happened? Oh, I knew it! My father is sick! He looked so bad when he was here. George, tell me!"

It was a time to be brave. So he told her. Her father's sickness gave Mary strength instead of greater weakness. George hurried to Bitter Point. He found the conditions there worse than he expected.

Old Mr. Meller had suffered a stroke. Not a fatal one, but he could not move and barely talk. And his nerves

had snapped, given way under the strain of so many arduous years. He was a pitiful, weeping wreck.

George tried his best to help. It affected him tremendously. He soon found out the greatest cause of Mr. Meller's distress. He could have guessed it. A gloomy outlook of the future loomed up before him. When the old man had been healthy, he had faced the future with fine trust, but now that his nerves were wrecked and he had lost all strength, he was near to despair.

Paralysis. He couldn't go on with his work. Resignation was a forced matter. What then? The house in which he lived was owned by the church at Bitter Point. He had saved nothing. He hadn't been able to. Nothing in all these years. Could George understand that? Yes, George could.

More than fifty years. Years of work and patience and forbearance and at the end — nothing. His children? They were far away and married, like Mary, George's wife, either to ministers or teachers, who were all serving the Church. All were in the same meager circumstances.

All these facts stared him in the face. What should he do?

At his bed sat old Mother Meller and her only unmarried daughter, Edna, both weeping and silent — the silence of bewilderment and anguish. As strong as he was, George felt a sharp throb of pain himself, which for a time robbed him of his voice. These two old people, Mr. Meller and his wife, always so cheerful, always so brave, how quickly adversity had changed them!

However, it was time for practical thinking besides pity. George made suggestions, the only ones that could be made.

The Church at large had a support fund. It paid monthly sums. Mr. Meller and his wife would have to make application for support. That would bring in a very

thin, little amount, for the fund was so thin itself, and there were many who drew from it. It was, above all, the duty of the congregation in which Mr. Meller had served more than fifty years to help its old servant in his distress.

When George said that, Mr. Meller began to tremble.

"But I — I can't be a burden to them, he stammered. "They —"

"Burden?" cried George. "It's a sacred debt they must pay you. It's back pay. Burden! Haven't you carried their burdens all these years for a pay that was so little that you couldn't save a penny?"

But poor Mr. Meller, in his infirmity, retained the thought of being a burden. It preyed on his mind. Not until he knew what would be the immediate outcome of all his trouble, could he have even a particle of rest. It was pitiful.

George spoke plainly to the congregation at Bitter Point, outlining the whole sad case, and then went home, after having visited the graves of his mother and son in Sunken Hollow, utterly depressed and broken in spirit. Many questions coursed through his mind that sought answers. Why must all this tribulation be? Why must it strike just the Christian — of all people Mr. Meller, who had always been so unselfish, so willing to make sacrifices. And finally, what could one tell Mary on coming home?

And at home — his own case — back into all that trouble and haggling concerning a new parsonage! From one sore pain into the other. He was sick and tired. His heart felt like lead. This year of his twenty-fifth anniversary, — what, after all, had it turned out to be? A year full of troubles and pain!

Only one thing in that anniversary year, besides the anniversary celebration itself, could be termed a happy incident, although it involved death itself.

It concerned that arch scoffer "Old Hickory" Dant.

It seemed that "Old Hickory" and Mr. Meller had been destined to suffer the same kind of illness at about the same time. When George came home from his sad visit to Bitter Point, he was told at once that Mr. Dant wished to see him.

"Mr. Dant?" he said, standing motionless and staring.

"He's had a stroke, too," Ruth explained to him in a whisper.

George was still in his low mood as he went out to see Mr. Dant.

"A scoffer all his life," he muttered disagreeably to himself. "And now, when he's down, he cries for the minister. That's the minister's business! He should hurry up and run for the same people who spend a whole lifetime laughing at him!"

But he found a different "Old Hickory." Like Mr. Meller, he had his troubles. But they were far worse ones. He was wholly meek and introspective. The "hammer that breaketh the rock in pieces" had been working upon his conscience. He was leaning back in a chair, breathing hard.

"Pastor," he gasped, "oh, I've been close to dying these days, I tell you."

George bit his lip.

"So I've been told," he said. "But you aren't afraid of it, of course."

"I — I don't know, Pastor. This thing, when it grips you, it's — I tell you, it's stronger than a man."

"Of course it is." George reached over and took "Old Hickory's" shaking hand and pressed it. "A man is a weak thing, Mr. Dant, especially in a case like this. He can get strength from nowhere on earth when he needs strength the most, from no doctor, out of no medicine bottle."

"Old Hickory" nodded in assent. "I've changed my mind, Pastor, about everything," he whispered. "When I looked into that darkness, I was like a feather — a feather in a great storm." He clung pathetically to George's hand. "You understand, pastor?"

"Yes, I understand."

"How a man can be a fool all his life, Pastor! The druggist was here yesterday to see me. You know what he said? He said, 'We all have to die sometime.' He — oh, he doesn't understand."

"No, he doesn't."

"All those times you were here, Pastor, to see me — and all those things you said — and I laughed at you — all those things they come back to me now." Again he clung to George's hand. "God bless you, Pastor!"

"He has blessed you, Mr. Dant."

"Old Hickory's" eyes were wide, and the door of his soul was open. The almighty power which had achieved this filled George with awe. He stayed with the old man an hour. They spoke together of the great things "Old Hickory" had never believed until now. He was "Old Hickory" no longer.

When George went home, the low spirit in him had lifted wonderfully. He saw clearly again the way of his life and the path of his duty. For three days he visited Mr. Dant every day. Those three days, he later said, repaid him for all that he had ever suffered in his experience as a minister.

In the middle of the third night, a cold exceedingly stormy night, he was aroused by some one at his door, who said that Mr. Dant would like to see him at once.

"Will you please hurry?" the man requested of him.

In blind haste George dressed. With the man he ran through the storm all the way to Mr. Dant's home. When

they arrived, Mr. Dant was dead. His aged face looked clear and peaceful.

They stood still and uncertain in the presence of death, staring at that lifeless form.

"It's too bad!" burst out the man, whom George now recognized to be the ticket agent from the railroad station.

"No," said George solemnly to him, shaking his head. "If he could speak, he wouldn't say so himself."

And the ticket agent shot him an enigmatic look for that.

Through that stormy night George hurried home, and his heart seemed on wings.

"What a miracle!" he cried to himself over and over, gazing into the wild skies above him. Great clouds roll, the wind roars, and thunder and lightning rock the world. Wonders — the wonders of God. But what a wonder — to change the heart of a man from darkness to light, to open blind eyes, to pierce a soul that was hardened with the hardness of stone! O God, let me never again utter a whimper from out of my small self! Let me never again be discouraged or disgruntled or weary. Keep me, against myself, keep me strong, let me ever travel this path of mine, this way of brilliance, this *delightful road*.

The funeral of Mr. Dant turned out to be a large affair, but only in the sense that the church was overcrowded. The druggist was there and the ticket agent and even the saloon-keeper. They had come out of respect for the dead man. Their coming was scarcely a tribute to his eleventh-hour conversion. They could not see that. They failed to see it even in George's sermon when he preached on "a feather in the storm," the words of Mr. Dant himself.

Later, as they stood at his bier, they shed a tear or two for what had so long been "Old Hickory" Dant. They had been his cronies. But now, Christian people knew,

there was quite a great difference between Mr. Dant and his old friends.

In the will of Mr. Dant some weeks later appeared a bequest that seemed strange to many. A considerable sum was to be used for building a fine brick parsonage for Iota, complete with basement and electric lights and a furnace. According to the attorney this bequest had always been included. Mr. Dant had not recently changed his will. So he had long appreciated what George had thought to be futile visits to him.

George and Mary wept tears when they were told of it.

"Then we're to have a new parsonage after all," said he. "And, thanks to Mr. Dant, no more arguments about it."

"A really nice home at last," said Mary. It will be a big change in my life."

"And in mine as well," George admitted.

A few weeks after this came a letter from Mary's afflicted father at Bitter Point.

He told them that he had figured everything with the help of his wife and daughter. He had been granted a small monthly sum from the support treasury of the Church at large, and the Bitter Point congregation had promised him a small monthly allowance, to be increased "when the times should become better." Together the two sums might enable them, by very careful planning, to establish a home in Bitter Point. They would try it at least. So the greatest worries were over.

"Oh," cried Mary, in dismay, "mother is to have more of the skimping and worrying even in her old age. It's a shame!"

"No," said George, after thinking it over. "I have a plan."

He sat down and wrote a fine letter to his father-in-law.

". . . Come and live with us. They are going to build

us a new parsonage now with plenty of room. You can live without any household troubles here. We'll get along. John has only three years more at college, and Ruthie will soon work again, and Betty will be growing up, too. Mary is fairly strong again. Her mother's being here will make her the stronger, and happy, too. And I will be very happy myself to have such companionship as yours. Though you can't walk well, you still can talk. This last, of course, is meant only in a good sense. So come. . . ."

So Mr. Meller and his wife and unmarried daughter came to Iota.

CHAPTER XVIII.

IN THE CITY.

The new parsonage of Iota was not half completed when George Willing received another one of those letters which create such a stir in the life of a minister. It called him to be the pastor of a large church in one of the most rapidly growing cities in the Mid-West.

He was known as a powerful speaker and a sincere preacher and had been highly recommended for this post. And the letter from the congregation which accompanied the call made his refusal to accept almost impossible.

He considered long and very unselfishly before he reached his decision to leave Iota. It would be a change indeed. His field would be greater, and the work would be wider in scope. That could not upset him. True, he was a man past fifty, but seemingly as strong as ever, and his health, barring the recurrent attacks of indigestion and some occasional tweaks of nervous tension, was generally good.

But in such personal matters he always considered himself last. It was the case of his wife and her parents and his wife's sister, who now lived with him, which caused him graver contemplations. Ever since the burning of the Iota parsonage, Mary had not really been well. Like her sister, whom George's two daughters called "Aunt Edna," she was high-strung and weak physically as a result. Old Mother Meller possessed more actual strength than either of them. She was a great help in the house. As for Mr. Meller, he was helpless, confined to a wheel-chair, but he was cheerful again. George wondered how the city with its many noises and cramped conditions would affect these three invalids of his.

His wife and her sister and her mother all urged his acceptance of the call. Mr. Meller said nothing. He was conscious of the fact that wherever he was, he would prove a dead-weight to his generous son-in-law, and often he wept silently on account of this condition. Once George happened to see it. The resultant lecture he delivered in chastisement did nothing but good to the old man's heart.

"O George, it's you I pity," Mr. Meller had said. "You have us here, three of us, and the little we can give you out of our income doesn't balance with the expenses we make. Now you will never be able to save. And you're not young any more. — I know, I know!"

But George replied, "The quicker you forget all this, the better it will be for your condition. When we move to the city now, there will be more for you to see from your window. Life won't be so monotonous. But you must never worry, especially not about other people."

Ruth, almost twenty, and Betty, nearly nine, rather looked forward to so great a change as life in a city. Ruth's young mind was already busy with many plans.

"I'll study typewriting," she told her father. "Many girls in the city are doing that now. It'll be just grand. I can help you lots, Daddy!"

And Betty said, "I'll be a stenographer, too."

"Well, you'd better study your lessons first," Ruth told her.

And Betty argued, "Oh, of course. That's self-evident. I mean, later on I'll be a stenographer."

"See, Mary," said George to his wife, his eyes twinkling, "there you have the Willing daughters. And no joke intended."

"They are willing," Mary agreed. "Oh, I really believe the city will change a great number of things for us, George, just for instance, my poor household budget."

George laughed.

"What's the matter, Mary? Scales not balancing again?"

"They never did balance just right. You know that."

"Oh, well!" he said. "The city will change that, I'm sure."

"I hope," said Mary, "that we'll be able to start saving something now, too. It's about time, George."

"Yes," he answered, "I agree. And we will, too."

John wrote from the seminary concerning the call his father had received.

". . . I would accept it by all means. Mission-opportunities in a city are wide and wonderful. You can benefit a far greater number of people. The Lord wants you to work there, we're sure of that. Otherwise you wouldn't have received the call. . . ."

The Iota congregation, however, was wholly against their pastor's leaving. They induced him to return the call with regrets. He did so, but it came back. Then they were compelled to yield, also with regrets.

Before George left Iota, where he had labored for more than seventeen years, he experienced many personal demonstrations of the love that had grown up steadily in the hearts of his church-members for him. He was honored with a set of resolutions and also with a gift of money, for which he was told to buy what he wished to have most as a remembrance of Iota and its people.

So George and his family and those who depended on him moved to the city. We shall withhold the name of the city. In church matters all cities are nearly the same, as George learned later in conferring with those brethren of his who also served in cities.

In certain respects the change in his domestic conditions was very marked. For the first time in his life he lived in

a fairly decent parsonage. That seemed to put new life and energy into Mary. She bubbled over with a spell of happiness when she first saw the house.

"O George!" she cried, "for twenty-seven years I've always dreamed of having a nice home. Now, here it is."

Her face was all alight, and that made George happier than any house could.

"Yes," he said, "time brings all things, — or rather, God is good. I'm glad for you, Mary. Good floors, a sanitary kitchen sink, electric lights, and a basement with a furnace. Well, well! But listen now — it's a good thing we had to live in that 'ice-box' of Sunken Hollow and in that Iota place. If we hadn't, we wouldn't know how to appreciate this house. Appreciation, you know, is a matter of experience." He laughed.

"You may be right," Mary rejoined, "but I don't know. I really think I could have properly appreciated a decent place to live right from the start, George."

For the first time also he was receiving a salary which, compared with his former remunerations, he could call fairly adequate.

"We'll do better than ever before, won't we?" he asked Mary.

"I can get along with my budget," she told him, "together with what mother gives me out of their little income. And I can save at least five dollars a month, that is, if nothing happens."

"We might get rich," he protested, — and they both laughed.

"Well, at least we'll get along more smoothly," Mary said. "Ruth's studying now and will soon work, and Betty will too, later. They'll both help. And John will soon be out of the seminary. What a relief that will be! By the way, he needs some money again, George."

For some reason George was in a merry mood.

"We might get an automobile some day," he joked.

She did not think it a joke at all. "Yes, why not? The congregation should get you one." Her voice changed. "Remember when we used to ride in the buggy in Sunken Hollow, George?"

"I can never forget it," he said, taking her hands. "You're still the same precious sweetheart, and if we could go through the same wonderful times again, Mary, I'd really prefer the buggy."

"Oh, how dear of you to say that! But the automobile is certainly a fine thing, isn't it?"

"It's a fine thing except on nice Sunday mornings, Mary. It's beginning to keep some people from giving at least an hour out of their week to God."

"Yes, that's true. And it was God who gave them the automobile, too, wasn't it?"

"That's true, too." He smiled at her.

She asked presently, "Well, now, how about that money John needs?"

"Oh, yes." He considered it seriously, for just now his pockets were empty. "How does the budget stand?"

"Well, I'm sorry, but there's nothing in it this time, that is, if we want to come out even this month."

"Oh!" — He paused and looked at her a moment. "Well, you have something saved already, haven't you?"

She hesitated, then admitted it. "Thirty-eight dollars. But —"

"Take off what he needs and send it to him."

"But that's not the way to save — to keep taking off. We've simply got to save something, George. We're getting older every day."

"I know, I know! But we just can't help it this time.

My salary won't come until the first of the month. We'll put it back."

She simply sat down and sighed and said nothing.

He wanted to cheer her then by becoming humorous and said, "I'm really beginning to think you're a little close, Mary."

Instantly she was insulted. She sprang up, her lips trembling, her eyes in tears.

"How can you say something like that! Shame on you! It's a wife's business to save, isn't it? The only reason I am driving it so much is because we haven't saved anything in twenty-seven years. You think I love talking about money and hoarding it? You're sadly mistaken. I hate it! That's what's broken my nerves, always trying to save with the miserable little salary we were getting."

She burst into tears and turned away from him.

He stood stricken for a moment. Then he went to her.

"Mary, Mary!" he said, uncertainly. "I was only trying to make a little fun."

"That's no fun!" she cried.

"Mary," he persisted gently, "you're all upset."

"Go away, I said!" Her back was still turned. "I'm sick and tired of this — business. I am!"

"Oh, Mary," — he checked for want of something to say that would convince her, — "these things will soon change, dear. — Look at me, Mary, won't you?" he pleaded.

He turned her gently about, and she permitted it and wiped her tears.

"Really they will," he continued. "Ruthie is a good girl; she'll help with John's expenses. And Betty, — you just wait till Betty gets started. She's the brightest of all. Things will change. It isn't like when the children were small. We'll be able to save after this."

She hushed him suddenly. Her mother was descending the steps. They had long made it a point never to discuss financial matters within the hearing of the two old people or Aunt Edna. Not once did they transgress this rule. So great was their consideration for them.

Every Sunday, mornings and evenings, George preached in his large church. It was an old, but well-kept building, standing on one of the principal streets in the center of the city. The congregation, it was said, was holding the site because of its rapidly increasing value. Some day in the future they intended to sell everything for a large amount and then build a magnificent church somewhere in a good residential section.

The morning service was generally well attended except on such Sundays in spring or summer which seemed "too perfect to be spent inside of a building." On those days many a family automobile would shoot past the church and out along some country highway.

The order of ceremony was quite different from those in his two former churches. At the opening there was the processional of the choir in the choir loft. He quickly became used to that although he could find little to like in seeing the singers emerge one by one from a dark little trap door in the loft and march solemnly to their seats.

And often their singing actually disturbed him in his presermon meditations. It lacked something. Simplicity, that was it. Many were trained singers, and some of them overdid their training rather woefully. Each endeavored to outsing the other. They rolled their "r's" like small thunder. So much technique did they inject into their song that not a word could be understood. On the final "amens" each tried to hold his note the longest. People in the pews below got the habit of listening to them and forgetting to sing along.

In most everything there was a certain amount of procession and pretense. Those who took up the offering also marched up and down the long aisle twice, painfully erect, once to receive the plates and again to deliver them.

It was all very different from the simplicity of Sunken Hollow and Iota. But Sunken Hollow was country, and Iota was a small town. This was a city. Custom was custom. Within a half year George was used to everything. And he found, despite their pretension, Christians here were just as sincere as elsewhere. After all, Christianity was a matter of the heart, not of the elaborateness of ceremony.

In the city his church-members lived far apart and scattered in all directions. In making his visits, he found that walking was hardly practical because it wasted so much time. In Iota he had always walked. Here he rode the street-cars. Unfortunately a minister could not ride free like a mail-carrier or a policeman. The car-fare amounted to about twenty-five cents a day, a little over a dollar a week. To many it might have seemed an insignificant item, not worth speaking about. But to George Willing it was something he had not been figuring on.

He hated to tell Mary — after their argument. But it was necessary if things should be done in a businesslike way.

"There go the five dollars I wanted to save every month," she said pathetically. And then her poor nerves made her become very angry again. "Oh, something should be done! You can't walk, you're over fifty. You ought to have an automobile to get around. They're not so expensive now. Everybody in the church has one — except you. And you're required to travel more than your members. If you should mention car-fare, they'd think you were cheap. But look what it means to us. People don't think. Oh, it makes me sick!" She broke down and cried. She cried often those days.

"Now, Mary," he said, stroking her graying head, "don't do this. Never cry about things that can't be. Crying won't bring them, and, besides, nothing is worth crying about, really. You're just upset."

"Well," she said, "they should get you an automobile. It's winter now, too."

"Yes," he agreed. "Standing in the cold and waiting for street-cars five times a day is not so nice."

"You might get pneumonia and die!"

He laughed. "Oh, not that. But I'm liable one of these days to freeze my ears. Nothing in this world can get quite so cold, Mary, as a man's ears."

The way he said it made her laugh, which was the reason why he had said it in that way.

A great thing was to occur that first Christmas. John was coming home during the vacation to preach his first sermon in his father's church. When George announced it from the pulpit one Sunday, his voice throbbed with pride.

All through the week preceding that Sunday, Mary was keyed to a very high pitch. George warned her many times to take things easier.

"Remember that you're not strong, Mary. If you're not careful, you may have to stay at home Sunday."

"Nothing can keep me at home," she said. "George, I've been waiting for this next Sunday ever since John was born!"

John came home on the following Thursday. He was a tall, strong young man, looking exactly like his father had looked nearly thirty years before.

"My boy!" cried Mary, putting her arms about his body and looking up at his face.

He kissed her very tenderly and said with gravity, "Mother, you're looking a little pale. I guess moving to

the city and all that has affected you. You must rest more."

George just gazed at his son and said, "Well, Pastor Willing, Junior!"

"Not quite," answered John, laughing. "But I'll get there — in two more years."

Ruth and Betty were very proud of their big brother. In fact, John was the pride of the entire house. When he preached that Sunday, all sat in front pews, all except his mother. She was compelled, against her wishes, to stay at home in bed. For George this took a good bit of the joy out of the occasion. He sat there in the pew as his son preached and could not help thinking of Mary, of the strenuous life she had been forced to live, with all the pains and the worries, and how it had affected her well-being.

John, standing erect and unafraid in his father's pulpit, acquitted himself well enough. With the first little nerve tension over, he spoke loudly and clearly. And what he said found especially his father's heart.

Sitting in his pew, George blinked his eyes, for he felt a sudden moisture in them. Some day, not so far in the future, he would be old, and his best days would be gone. But this son of his to whom he now listened could take over the burden when life would force his father to lay it down. He was very certain of that.

It was a happy Christmas, that first one in the city parsonage. Mary was not obliged to stay fast in bed, only the great excitement of that Sunday had pressed her down. When the younger Mary and her sister Helen came with their children, the family circle was once more complete.

Just like in years gone by, there was the tree in the center of the room, a big tree, like those they had cut down long ago in the great woods of Sunken Hollow. There were the toys piled around it, and the children who

played with them now were George's and Mary's grandchildren. Their gaiety was contagious; it took every one in its friendly grip, even old Mr. Meller, who had told George before that he felt somehow that this would be his last Christmas.

When the evening was over and all had retired, George still sat with Mary at the fireplace for a little while. It had been too wonderful and had to be discussed a bit. Sleep was not yet possible.

"Evenings such as this," she murmured, "are worth a whole lifetime. I feel young again, George; really I do."

"And I, too," he said, looking off into the fire. "How time flies, Mary! To-night, sitting here and watching these children playing around the tree, — for a while I really imagined we were back in the old days."

"And I felt the same," she said. "And almost thirty years have flown by, and you and I are both gray and lined in the face. It's true, a person is as old as he feels."

"Yes," he agreed. "And life is very beautiful, Mary. It somehow all came back to-night, all the joys we've had. When I look back," — he stopped and fell to thinking.

The silence held on for a while. Then Mary broke in on their joint meditation.

"Here we are again, George, acting and talking like two old people. We are doing this too often. Feel sorry for ourselves, I guess. Why, we're not really old, only a little more than half a hundred. What's that?"

He looked at her tenderly.

"You are the same Mary as always," he said, "brave and gay. I believe it's this what keeps you up in spite of your troubles."

"Oh, I haven't any troubles," she told him. "Forget them. Let's go to bed, George. If there's one thing two old people need, it's sleep."

"Two old people?" he questioned with a slight twinkle.

"Well, two young old people," she corrected.

And they laughed together.

It was only at such odd moments that George gave any consideration to his age. Perhaps Mary's recurring troubles brought it on. But fifty-four years was really still young. Mostly he worked just as any young man would have worked, perhaps harder.

His sermons were well received. The morning services at his church always had plenty of listeners. But the evening services were very poorly attended. A few stray sheep scattered in long rows of empty benches.

So George worked to populate the pews in the evening services. He worked out a special series of sermons and had the topics printed and distributed in advance. Nothing seemed to help. It was not the habit to attend church of an evening, people told him. But still he labored to improve the condition.

In her household Mary soon found making ends meet as hard as ever. Life in the city seemed to require more. She was compelled to revise her budget completely. For long nights she sat over it, and Ruth helped her.

Ruth had found a job and was earning a small weekly salary. Most of it she gave to her mother to help defray expenses. Ruth was an exceptional girl. Few would have done it without a whimper as she did.

"I'm studying bookkeeping in the office on the side," she said. "The girl that's doing it now is going to get married soon. If I can handle both my job and hers, I could do much better."

"Don't overwork yourself," Mary cautioned.

"Oh, I won't."

The truth was that Ruth wished to earn more money in order to be able to keep more for herself. She was a

pretty girl and had seen many pretty things in shop windows which her heart desired. So she worked hard, harder than she should have done.

Perhaps if John had not gone to college, the Willing family could have progressed better in financial matters. John could now be earning money, as intelligent and strong as he was. No one in the house, however, ever mentioned that fact. It was the dream of all that he should preach like his father, and whatever cost or sacrifice that would take they gladly paid.

During the third winter sad days came to them. Mary's father died. Despite his illness and all the extra work it caused he had become a much-loved grandfather in the house. His going left a strange vacant spot that was not filled for a long time.

Old Teacher Meller died happily. He was glad, he said, to have been of some service to the Lord. Whatever he had suffered in his life was little enough.

In Bitter Point there were many grown people who in their youth had learned the lesson of their life from his lips. A few of them sent letters of condolence at his passing. The thing most thought of privately in Bitter Point in connection with the death of Teacher Meller was that now, since he was dead, the allowance which the congregation had sent him every month would stop automatically. In some quarters it caused a sigh of relief.

Her father's death took another portion of strength out of Mary. For weeks after the funeral she was confined to her bed. Then she was able to be up and about again, but could do no work. Aunt Edna, always weak herself, could do no more than nurse her sister a little. The duties of the house fell to Betty, who stayed home from school, and to old Mother Meller. Old Mother Meller was a real blessing in the parsonage.

George, in those days, with all his ever-increasing work, took much time to sit with his wife and give her of his love and good cheer. She had moments of depression, when she needed him sorely. He was tenderly patient and always cheerful. From his steady eyes and the courage in his heart she drew strength.

"Oh," she said many times, "if only, with all your other worries, I didn't have to worry you too, George!"

"Don't even speak of worries, Mary," he always answered. "I don't worry. And you must not."

She wouldn't worry either, he knew, if it were not for her condition. Mostly she had been smiling and gay. Only when illness cast her down, did she forget and begin to worry.

He hoped and prayed for a change in her. He consulted a number of doctors. All told him quite the same.

"It's nerves, plainly and simply. And that's all. Lift that burden of responsibility she's been carrying all these years just a little and watch her improve."

"What can I do?" said George dully. "I'm a minister. This life has to go on. I couldn't resign and do something else. I — well, I'm too old. I've got to keep on."

They said, "Can't you have some one else run the household?"

"It is being run now by my daughters and my mother-in-law. I don't let her touch anything. But still she carries the whole business with all its burdens on her mind. I can't stop her. It's the responsibility of a minister's wife, I guess."

"There's only one thing to do," one of the doctors decided at last. "Send her to some other environment for a complete rest, say six months at least."

Hearing that, George sat down as if stunned by a blow. He passed his hand over his gray hair.

"After so many years," he said dreamily to himself, "to be separated now from Mary! What will that be? With all her weakness she's always been my strength."

The doctor seemed touched.

"Six months is only a short time for you," he said. "But in that time she can pick up wonderfully."

"I'll do it of course," said George gravely. "I'll send her to my oldest daughter in the country."

"That will be just the thing," agreed the doctor.

Very reluctantly Mary agreed to leave George for a time. She knew how he needed her. In those six months, however, according to her letters, she seemed to be improving a great deal, and the healthy color was coming back to her cheeks. But in those same six months he was completely lost. He seemed to grow six years older. He wandered about in the house pathetically, with a vague expression. He forgot things in his sermons. He seemed altogether useless to himself. It was pitiful.

One Sunday morning, alone in the vestry of the church, he gave way to all the things that gnawed on his mind. He sat down and hid his face in his hands.

"God," he said, "I can't do without her. If she should die, I, too, would be done for. Let her stay with me, sick or well; only let her stay if my work is to go on."

Then, after six months, came the day when Mary returned to him. She arrived on a fresh morning, golden with warm sunlight. It was the grandest day of George's life. She looked so young and sweet, like a girl almost, to his eager eyes.

"Mary," he cried, "is it you? Oh, God is good to us! Why, you look just as you did back in old Sunken Hollow" — and he whispered in his elation, "It's so, my little sweetheart."

"Oh, yes," she mocked, with all her old gaiety returned.

"You know it isn't so, George. I've got six new wrinkles around my eyes."

"Yes," he agreed, "I noticed them. They're beautiful!"

Later, in the house, Mary soon looked around with her old efficient glance.

"Well, how is everything getting along here?"

But George hushed her at once. "Now, my dear, I want you to sit down and rest and never get sick again. Ruth is going to manage the house. She's quit her job because Betty will work in only a few years now. And Mother and Aunt Edna will help Ruth. You're too precious to do any work. We're all agreed on that. You are to sit on a chair like a queen on a throne and merely direct the wheels of activity."

Mary started to object, but he would not let her. His whole manner was entirely joyous. He was thoroughly happy. And he felt strong, strong enough to push over a mountain.

"Now," he cried, "life for us will begin all over again!"

It did seem as though it would, that sunny morning.

CHAPTER XIX.

A TRANQUIL PERIOD.

The first five years of his life in the city are put in many words in George Willing's diary. They included much. Mr. Meller's death. Mary's illness and her fine recovery. The war. John's decision to go as a missionary to India, which caused much anxiety at home, but was not possible at the time because of the war. Aunt Edna's death. Ruth's illness and the pathetic results of it.

Mary's sister died in the first year of the war. Though she had been of little help, she had been a loved companion to Mary. Aunt Edna's was a pitiful case. She had given up everything to stay with her parents in Bitter Point and then had become ill, only to be a burden to them and later also to her brother-in-law George. Her noble plan to become the strength of her aged father and mother had failed completely. Her mother even outlived her. It was one of those puzzling things of life, those things that simply were not to be.

George's daughter Ruth was a good deal like her Aunt Edna. She, too, wanted to stay with her parents. Several young men paid her fond attentions, but she disregarded them. Twice she obtained good positions, and twice she resigned them in order to be of help to her mother in the house. The last time, in endeavoring to be of too much service, she had overworked herself. She broke down shortly after Aunt Edna's death, and her sickness developed into a serious case of typhoid fever, which took away her youth and beauty and left her a half invalid for life. Of all the bitter things George and Mary had experienced Ruth's misfortune touched them quite the most. It seemed marvelous that Ruth herself was always so cheerful as she did

the work about the house which she was able to do. Ruth, George often thought, was a wonderful girl.

In Betty he had another fine daughter. She, in addition to her work in the city, together with her old grandmother, who was still remarkably well and able for her great age, did most of the housework. Of course, Mary helped, and she planned almost everything. Planning, indeed, was necessary, for in the days immediately following the war it was harder than ever to run a house on small funds. But George would not permit her to take much active part in the work itself. She knew why he would not permit it, and she obeyed him.

At seventeen years, Betty already worked as a stenographer and made nineteen dollars a week. A good part of her money went to the house. She was a beautiful girl, with her red, wavy hair, her very white skin, and her mother's dark eyes and brows. From George she had inherited a lively nature, which often showed itself at this period of her life in jokes which she played on practically every one in the house.

Her brother John, by this time, was in the ministry, serving a number of mission-charges in the wide-open spaces of far-away Canada. He still entertained the romantic idea of going to India as a missionary. But somehow his father knew that he would never go as long as his mother lived. John was like George, never considering himself. But he did consider his mother.

The excitement and the extra work which the war caused in a congregation kept George so busy that he had little time to consider his own affairs. Of one thing he made sure daily, that Mary was doing as little work as possible. Himself he did not spare.

Sometime after the war the congregation raised a house-to-house subscription in order to buy him the long-needed

automobile. The money for it could not be taken out of the treasury. All available funds passed into what was called the building fund. The value of real estate, the people said, would rise quickly after the depression caused by the war. Then would be the time to sell the old city church and build a new one. This was the reason for the rapidly growing building fund and also for the embarrassing canvass methods to obtain George's automobile.

He finally received the machine with the stipulation that he was to furnish his own gasoline.

"Why," said George, "that's fair enough. Gasoline is a small item."

But Mary wisely told him, "You'll not think so, George, once you get started. The people expect you to visit them. If you don't, they'll complain. Just let us see how much gasoline you will have to buy if you want to drive around to all the places."

Mary proved to be right about that. It kept both figuring more closely than ever to keep up the use of the car. Frequently it became altogether impossible. Often George had to take the few cents he could find about the house and take a street-car just because the gasoline tank was empty.

He possessed a peculiar courage in those days after the war. Perhaps it was the reckless spirit of the day. For the first time in his life he was moved to put all these financial troubles of his before a meeting of his congregation. He was clear in his explanations, telling everything. It had its effect.

One member rose and said in great surprise, "Are those really the actual conditions, that our pastor at times cannot even buy his gasoline?"

And another explained, "Why, that's news to me! Certainly that will have to be changed."

A third rose and said with some emphasis, "What's the use of these questions? News? We should have known. It's plain as day. Brethren, I think we have been sleeping. Do you realize what we are paying our pastor? Who can live on that? Look how the war has raised the prices. Everything went up except his salary."

"That's right," said several others, nodding their heads several times.

The speaker went on, "He never said anything till now; but just because he didn't, that's no excuse for us not thinking. I say we were dreaming! A pastor works as hard as any of us. And he has his expenses, too. Why, look at our pastor. It's not only his own family he had to take care of, either. He's had lots of extra bills. Think it over. Figure it out."

They figured it out. It didn't really take much figuring. They were actually startled when they began to realize how cheaply they had been getting the services of their minister. The meeting ended with George's receiving an increase that actually stunned him.

"Just think, Mary," he told his wife, bursting into the house ten minutes later, "they're going to pay us forty dollars a month more — forty dollars!"

"Forty dollars," she echoed, stupefied. "Forty dollars! O George, is that really true?"

"Really true, Mary." He put his arm about her. "Now all our troubles are over. We'll get along just like other folks. Oh, the congregation was so fine about it! They said they had been dreaming. They hadn't even thought about what a difficult time we were having to make things go. But they saw it immediately when I told them. And see how generous they were!"

"Forty dollars," Mary still repeated dreamily. "My, but that does seem a lot, doesn't it? I'll have to change the budget."

But when she had done that, making new allotments here and there, she was surprised to see how quickly the extra forty dollars could dwindle. It didn't seem like such a scandalously great amount after all. Those days were days when prices of everything were inflated like balloons. She now saw that only by means of employing the utmost frugality had she been able to manage the household till now. Of necessity she had been actually stingy with herself and her family.

But now all that was to be better. Life could be more normal in every way. George could get a new suit in place of the one that had served him only too long, and Betty could keep a little more of her own money for her clothes. On the table there could be some little extra dishes now and then, and even ice-cream on Sunday evenings after church wouldn't be a piece of extravagance. And the much-abused savings account of the Willings could pick up a little. It had better pick up if it ever wished to amount to anything.

So, in this pleasant attitude a number of years went by, which might be called the smoothest period in all of George Willing's experience as a minister. Because of so little trouble of any kind, Mary was generally well and happy. Also in the church, matters followed a wholly tranquil course.

"We can grow old more gracefully," George told his wife.

She was forced to admit at last that the years were slowly gathering upon both of them. Even though she felt well enough, she could no longer do the things she had done so long without soon feeling a marked fatigue. With him it was the same. After a busy day he would sit down evenings to read; but he would soon go to sleep over his book.

The mirror told them even more plainly that their youth was a thing of the past. Her hair was completely white. It gave her a new kind of beauty, the sweetness that can be seen in the paintings of old mothers by great masters. Her face was finely lined about the eyes and the mouth. It contained the marks of much trouble and suffering, but they gave her a tender, sympathetic look. Only her brown eyes were as bright as ever, the eyes of the same young girl who long ago had wrought such a great change in the life of a young minister in old Sunken Hollow.

And that very young minister was quite changed also in his looks. His blond hair had turned noticeably thin and gray. It barely covered a widening bald spot on the back of his head. That bald spot was especially dear to the whole family. Betty, with the impishness that was in her, loved to come unnoticed from behind and blow very gently upon it. And her father would jump, for that bald spot was very sensitive.

The strong face of his younger days was now slightly heavier, but less set. The mustache he had formerly worn was gone. His forehead contained a maze of deepening lines; the brows were heavy, and he wore big, round, shell-rimmed glasses whenever he read or studied. Somehow they gave him the look of a wealthy banker or financier, which he certainly was not. His eyes, like his wife's, were as bright and keen as ever, and no sign of a droop was in his shoulders or of slowness in his gait. In some ways it seemed he would always be the same George Willing, no matter what age did to him.

Those tranquil years brought other changes which went to increase the peace and the happiness of mind. John was married and came home on his honeymoon trip. His bride proved to be just as little a thing as Mary had been, but

with a spirit. John was taller than she by a full foot. In those two George and Mary saw their own youth and love reflected. Something seemed lost and gone when they had to return to John's charge.

Betty was very successful in her work. At twenty she had changed positions; she had gone to work for an advertising agency and had risen from stenographer to some sort of secretary. And she was now interested in the writing of copy.

"It's easy," she told her father one evening, "if you've got the inclination for it. You just take a jar of face cream or a tube of tooth-paste or whatever it is, smell it a while and then sit down and write a lot of catchy words about it. See? To make people buy it, you know. Of course, there are some technical things that have to be learned. But there's a nice young fellow in the copy department, Mr. Reed, he's promised to teach me. It's very simple."

"Very simple, no doubt," smiled George skeptically. But he had great faith in his youngest daughter nevertheless.

With Betty's promotion her pay, too, had increased; she paid her mother substantial board. Ruth, the poor thing, now earned a little income at home. She had talent for painting, and she employed it in decorating chinaware. George helped her with the baking of them when the designs were finished. It was pastime and fun. There was nothing he would not do or procure for Ruth in order to keep her interested and happy.

It seemed that under these conditions, Mary's health had been ever improving. Naturally she was always concerned with the things of the household. For the first time in her life she was able to run all necessary affairs and save money regularly as most other people did. Every month she added to the savings account.

"Just think, George," she whispered to him one day, we've almost got a thousand dollars saved now."

"A thousand," he repeated in an awed whisper, widening his eyes. "But that's wonderful. You don't suppose there's any danger of our becoming materially minded, of beginning to love money, do you?"

"I don't know," she answered a little wearily. "I guess not, George. I think we're past that. We only save now because we'll surely need it some day." She stopped and gazed at him significantly.

"Yes, I know," he told her, patting her hand. "Of course, I was only joking. You have always been a wonderful manager. It's easy enough for me to say ,'We mustn't give any thought to money,' and then to leave the difficult management of our small funds to some one else. That's what I did all through our life."

"Oh, no, George," she interrupted him, "you were always wonderful. I can't tell you how I appreciated your always having left me to manage the household. Why, I've heard of ministers who carry their whole month's salary in their hip-pocket and whose wives have to come to them every time they want something for the house. What if you'd been like that, George?"

"I'll tell you," he said frankly. "If I'd been like that, we'd probably be head over heels in debt to-day instead of being able to save. I knew what a poor manager I was and what a good one you are. A woman is always wiser in such things."

She laughed and regarded him with wifely tenderness.

"We have always understood each other, haven't we, George?"

He nodded precisely.

"That's why," he said, "our life has always been such a happy one."

CHAPTER XX.

BUILDING TIME.

What had been discussed and planned for years by George Willing's city congregation was now quite suddenly executed in the space of a few weeks.

The church and the site on which it stood was sold for a very attractive amount to a development company, and new lots were purchased in an exclusive section. Almost immediately the services of a well-known architect were retained, who was instructed to draw up elaborate plans, and very shortly thereafter building was begun.

Much discussion went on, pro and con, in the special meetings of the congregation during this speedy process. Different people had different notions, and so there were plenty of disputes as to this and that and everything else concerning the new church.

For a minister of sixty-five years of age the whole matter constituted quite a mental strain. George attended all the meetings. Every argument had to be heard and settled, and a sound basis upon which to proceed had to be established.

"It's not every day that we're building a church," the people said. "Let's talk about this thing and do it right."

And so there were meetings and more meetings. Evenings which George had heretofore been able to spend quietly in his home with his family were now swallowed up in building discussions. And those gatherings generally lasted almost till midnight. Already before the foundations of the new building were up, George was heartily weary of it all, though, of course, he did not say so.

They had even wanted to put him on the building committee. But for Mary's sake he had refused that.

"Don't do it, George," she had cautioned him anxiously. "You're not a young man. You have no idea what it means for a minister to have a hand in the building of a church. Take a lesson from the experience of others. Keep out of it. Please do!"

"Of course," he told her thoughtfully, "I would like to be of help wherever I could."

"No, George. Don't do it. If you can't understand the risk yourself, then keep out of it just to please me. They've got plenty of men who understand building. After all, what does a pastor know about building? Admit it, George."

"Well, I know nothing, really," he confessed. "But I could make certain suggestions as to churchly style and all that. I've read some things."

"Let the architect make all those suggestions. They've selected an experienced man. If people are dissatisfied later, it will be his fault and not yours. Don't you see, George? It's not a matter of principle, exactly, but — well, it's a matter of tact, of knowing what's good for you. Don't you see?"

He thought it over carefully.

"I think you are right," he said at last. "My wise little wife. Always taking such good care of her husband. Of course I'll refuse. It may be that they only wanted to appoint me for politeness' sake or something like that."

"Well, at least we'll look at it in that way," she said.

Betty, too, had been very much against it. Betty, in the full bloom of young womanhood, was a modern girl with a keen perception and frankly spoken views. Her pretty red head was full of sensible ideas.

She said, "Yes, I should say you had better keep out of it, Daddy. You're too old for all that commotion and

all those extra meetings. Rather stay at home nights and listen to the radio."

It was Betty who had bought that radio for the house and many other things. When the radio had first arrived, George had begun a little eulogy on the wonders of twentieth-century science.

"Just think," he had marveled, gazing at the polished box. "It can receive voices and music from waves in the air which are induced miles and miles away. That's study for you! A sensitive little plate of iron is made to vibrate by sound, these vibrations are transmitted by means of an electric spark sent into the air, and this causes the radio waves. They travel a great distance, and we pick them up, and they are converted into sound again by our loud speaker. It's all very wonderful. We're getting wiser every day."

And Betty's laughing answer to that had been, "Well, let's not try to figure it out; let's turn it on and see how it sounds."

That's the kind of girl she was. Practical. A fine success in business. That same Mr. Reed who had been teaching her the art of writing ads had now formed his own company — the Thomas Reed Advertising Agency. And Betty was working for him as his secretary and right-hand woman. The new venture seemed to be progressing wonderfully. Betty's salary was quite a large one for a woman, as large almost as her father's. She certainly proved a great help to her parents in their old days.

Ruth's china-painting business was also progressing in a way. She had enough work to keep her going steadily. But her prices were far too low for the quality of work she did. The business was scarcely a well-paying one, but she loved it, and it kept her mind and body occupied. It was a blessing for her. Grandmother Meller, still strong,

though far in the seventies, told her not to worry about the housework. And Mary gained strength enough to carry on herself.

Of his ambitious daughters George was mighty proud. No matter how much his own work engaged his thoughts, he always found time to give them a word of praise and encouragement. His family life at this late date was ideal.

He often wondered, as any father would, about this Mr. Thomas Reed, of whom Betty talked so very much at home. Once he went to the office of the advertising agency to meet him. He found him to be a handsome and polite young gentleman, very intelligent and successful. And he found something else, too, which he discussed seriously with his wife when he returned.

"He's very much interested in our Betty. I'm quite sure of that."

"Oh," said Mary, gazing at him and thinking. "What do you think of him?"

"I think he's a fine young fellow. There's nothing that I could take objection to except — except that he's not a Christian, Mary. It means so much."

"He's not? Do you know that?"

"He admitted it to me when we happened to talk about our work."

Mary sat down and considered it.

"What does Betty say?" she asked after a while.

"I haven't talked to her about it. But I will."

He talked to Betty that evening, like a good loving father. And she appreciated it and told him everything.

"Several times he spoke of coming to see me here at the house. I've always held him off."

"Why?"

"Well, it's just because of what you said, Daddy."

"Well, but did you let him know the reason?"

"Yes, several times. I told him I would rather keep company with a fellow who was a Christian or at least wanted to be one some day."

"And what did he say to that?"

"He said, 'Oh, I'll go to church. I'd do anything for you.'" She laughed softly.

"And what did you say to that, Betty?"

"I told him I didn't want him to be a Christian to please me. I said I wanted him to be like that for his own sake, to see the necessity of it himself."

"Ah! You were right, Betty." George paused, looking at her squarely. "Betty, I don't think you could ever be happy with a man who didn't believe as you did. I've seen that case too often. It always causes heartache later, every time, when one believes, and the other doesn't."

"I know," she said rather wistfully and paused a while, twisting her fingers. "What he needs is instruction, Daddy. He thinks Christianity is a sort of superstition — you know, a style or a fad. He doesn't realize that it's the truth. He never had the chance to learn about it as we did. If he could be shown —" she stopped and looked at her father with pleading eyes.

"Let him come to the house the next time he asks you," George suggested to her at once. "I'll try to show him the truth gradually. He doesn't scoff, does he, make fun of such matters?"

"Oh, no. He says the church is a good thing — to make people live better."

"Oh, yes. But he thinks that he doesn't need it."

She hesitated. "I suppose so."

George drew a breath.

"Well, Betty, I can show him very certainly that he needs it. I can show him that God is his Maker, who put him, Thomas Reed, into this world for a purpose. I can

show him that he is not fulfilling that purpose. I can prove to him that he is sinful and that therefore he needs the grace which his Maker is willing to give him through Christ. If he sees it, he will accept what we believe. If he does not, — well, we will have to be a little patient."

There was silence. Looking at Betty, he saw that she was very much flushed and excited. She met his steady glance in a pretty confusion. But he smiled encouragingly. Suddenly she reached up and drew his head down and laid her hot young cheek against his old face.

"Daddy, you're wonderful!" she murmured.

Despite the fact that he had refused to serve on the building committee, George was very much interested in the progress of construction of his new church. Every day he drove his automobile, which, by the way, was still the original one, showing the wear and tear of years, to the spot where the edifice was quickly going up.

It would certainly be a beautiful house of worship when completed. White cut stone, with high, gorgeous windows. The interior dim and lofty, with tall columns like some great cathedral. Many imported fixtures. The final cost would far exceed the original appropriation. But as he visualized the finished building, an object of rare beauty dedicated to the Lord, he said to himself that it was worth the price.

Months later, when the finely carved pulpit was being put in, he stood in that vast, high space and for the first time felt a bit of dizziness. He was to preach in this great enclosure, his voice was to echo along these lofty walls. The inherent humility in his heart somehow stood in awe of the prospect.

He still held service in the old church, which was not to be razed until the following spring. Somehow he had become used to that space, accustomed to speaking from

its pulpit. He finally admitted to himself that he loved it and would hate to leave it. In this new church everything would seem strange. Somehow he would feel like a dwarf in a deep chasm.

He confessed his thoughts to his wife one evening. And as they talked, his real feelings were bared.

"I don't know what's wrong with me, Mary, but I can't look forward with much enthusiasm to those very elaborate surroundings."

"O well! It's something you've never been accustomed to," she explained. "Consider the churches you've preached in, George. Iota's was well built, but small and plain. You'll get used to this soon enough."

"Will I?" Doubt showed in his features. "It seems to me I'll always feel as though I lacked something, as though the old preacher were not quite in keeping with the new church."

"Oh, don't be foolish, George!" she cried quickly.

"I don't know," he confessed, sitting down. "Perhaps it's my age. These people may want a young and finer man in their elaborate pulpit."

"Oh, George!" Her tone grew anxious. "Why, they couldn't get a finer man than you, dear!"

He forced a laugh.

"You know what I mean, Mary. I'm over sixty-five. And we do lose something with age. The fire and charm of youth, I guess." He smiled a trifle bitterly. "Something which I am no longer able to give."

"You are never too old to give that which is the only thing that should be given in a church — God's Word as truly and powerfully as you always preached it."

"Yes," he said. "That's so. But these people — how will they think? That's the question."

Moments such as these he had off and on, times when

he keenly felt his age, when he would suddenly grow tired in the midst of his work and lose heart. But she would drive those thoughts from his mind. He would gather his old strength, forget his thoughts, and keep on.

Already he was putting down ideas for the opening sermon in the new church. It was to be a fitting text, one especially to blast human pretense and pride. It was true, a building like that had the tendency to make people proud if they were not very vigilant. And, certainly, there was no room for human pride in a church. He would consistently warn against it.

A larger church was quite necessary. There was no doubt that the congregation had been steadily growing. And now, as always, despite his age, George carried on his zealous mission-work. It gave him joy and satisfaction, especially to bear the truth to people who had never heard it before, or to come to the rescue of such as once had known it, but had forgotten it again or thought they had time to think of their soul's welfare later in life. Many such people had been won or won back, and they were now sincere members of the church.

One of a number of persons whom he privately instructed was young Thomas Reed, and George found his heart to be very receptive. Regularly the young man came to the parsonage on Tuesday evenings. George spent an hour or more with him.

On one of those evenings, after his period of instruction, Tom Reed, as Betty called him, stood with her outside on the doorstep of the parsonage.

"Your father, Betty," he told her, "is the most intelligent and sincere man I ever knew. How he can tell a person things! I used to think of all this as something for a fellow to take or leave as he saw fit and that it really made no difference either way."

"You mean," she said hopefully, "that you're being convinced, Tom Reed?"

"I do mean that. I'm convinced that mighty few people in this world do any real thinking. They just skim the top of things. Religion never interested me. Why, Betty, I used to accept all those things, those scientific theories of how the world came to be and all that, without any question as high-grade thought. Now it appears that the people who believe the way your father believes are the ones who do the deepest thinking."

"I'm glad you're beginning to see it," she said softly.

There was a pause. They watched the stream of automobiles with glaring head-lights as they passed the house. She could see that he was not merely talking, but that he was deeply interested. He was groping for thoughts to express his feelings further.

"Why," he said after a while, "take all these profound thinkers and scientists we hear and read about. In the end, what do these smart fellows really know about life? Not a single important thing. They can't explain it, they can't manufacture it, they can't prevent death. They can't even make a blade of grass. All this talk of progress — we make airplanes to fly with, and we say that's wonderful, but, after all, the finest, latest model plane is a big, clumsy, lumbering thing when compared to the grace and ease of a flying sparrow. It's something to think about, Betty. A man is either a 'sap' or a fool if he can't see it. The trouble with most of us is we simply refuse to think straight."

She nodded silently in agreement. Her face flushed in the darkness. Her eyes were shining as she looked at him. To hear Tom Reed talk like that, who had always been talking of nothing but advertising and business, except when he said tender things to her, seemed marvelous.

His handsome face was still much in thought, the brows were knit together. He stared out into the street, and his mind seemed far away. In his elegant clothes he sat down on the doorstep and went on talking.

"It makes you think," he mused, "that this old world, as grown and advanced as it seems, is a mighty small, insignificant thing after all. There's something higher and greater all around it, something that made it, knows all there is to know about it, and keeps it going."

"That's God, Tom," said Betty quickly, sitting down at his side. "And you can learn all about Him in the Bible. It's the only book that contains nothing but the truth; for it was given us by Him who is the Truth."

They talked much more that evening, sitting there on the steps. When he finally bade her good night, he said to her: —

"Yes, I think your father is right in what he believes. It's a big thing he's working for — the biggest thing in the world."

"He's been following it all his life," said Betty. "We really can't know what it is. We, in the office, for instance, every day, — getting contracts, laying out our designs, writing our copy, and gloating over it when we see it in print, — what do we business people know about the life and work of a minister?"

"You ought to know a lot about it," he told her. "You've been brought up in a parsonage."

"Yes," she agreed thoughtfully, "I know a lot. I do know that a minister does not get one-tenth of the appreciation and credit in this world that he deserves. But my father never looked for it either. It's the disappointments a minister has that often sour his life, for instance, the people who sit in church and listen to his sermons and then do the contrary; also the great number of people outside of

the church who just laugh when he wants to give them the help they need most, and those who try to stamp him out altogether, like all those Free Thought people, the atheistic societies, and all that. In cases like that you'd almost think that the minister is trying to be an enemy of the people instead of their best friend. I tell you it's not easy."

Tom Reed stood and looked at her, at her face, so white and sweet in the dim light, her shining eyes, her red hair, which appeared so dark in the gloom.

"You're just like your dad, Betty," he said impulsively.

"Am I?" she asked, meeting his eyes.

"Yes. I'm thankful for the day when I met you."

She sighed and held out her hand.

"Good-by, Tom Reed. It's getting late."

"Oh," he laughed, "I'm not going to follow this up — not yet. I know my place now." His tone changed. "But, Betty, I'm really beginning to see things the way you see them. Do you believe that?"

"Yes. I know you're thinking for yourself. I could see it in your face. That's why I said I was glad."

He pressed her hand hard.

"You're the loveliest girl there is," he said vibrantly and then turned away and hurried down to his automobile at the curb. "Good-by," he called. "See you in the morning."

"'By," she answered.

And then she stood there, and as his car pulled out, she watched it with happiness in her eyes.

In spring the new church was finished. The dedication services took place on a Sunday in June. It was a splendid celebration. In an elaborate ceremony the chairman of the building committee proffered the keys to those massive oaken doors to George, the minister. George unlocked them with appropriate words of supplication to God. And a multitude streamed in, composed of people from near

and far besides the regular church-members. In that dedication service, unfortunately, there was much more inspection than attention.

In the assembly sat Mary, white-haired, sweet-faced, elated. Her aged mother sat with her on the one side and Ruth on the other. The eyes of all three were glued upon George — in front, in a seat of honor. He kept his head bowed, and somehow, in the light that came through the stained-glass windows, his hair looked grayer and thinner than ever. Mary, sitting far behind him in the crowd, realized it, and her lips began to tremble just a little.

Near by were Betty and Tom Reed. Many an eye rested on that singularly handsome pair. Her dress was blue, and over her red hair she wore a small, close-fitting, blue hat. His finely formed young face bore a serious look. Tom Reed, eager for this new knowledge that had come into his life, forgot the interior decorations and listened to the sermon.

Some weeks later, in the business meeting of the congregation, when the final reports of the committee were submitted, it became very evident that the building of the new church had been a shot at a mark far too lofty for the current funds to reach. A considerable indebtedness would result. Many seemed to wake up and realize it for the first time. A hot dispute arose.

"Why, we sold that old property for enough to build two churches!" cried an irate member, his fist raised as if to strike.

"You don't know a thing about the price of building nowadays," he was told by the committee. "Do you think this is the eighteenth century?"

Another complained, "All that money spent, — and I tell you there's lots of things about that building I don't like."

"Am I to understand," said an old white-haired fellow who was partly deaf, "that all the money we had, and what we subscribed in addition, didn't reach and that we are to have debts?"

"Yes, sir! Some forty thosand dollars!" said one of the committee proudly. "Listen, brethren, a church that hasn't anything to work for will die of inertia in time. It's always got to have something to figure out, don't you see?"

"Well, we'd better start figuring out right away how we're going to do it," shouted the irate member again, this time with both fists up.

And George sat quietly and listened. His spirit seemed a bit saddened by all that was still said, but he was happy in regard to one thing — that he had not served on the building committee. It was one of the tribulations in the life of a minister which he had escaped.

CHAPTER XXI.

ENOUGH.

"He has served us ten years now, and he's close to seventy years old. Don't you think we ought to give our pastor an assistant?"

This opinion was expressed in the meeting of the church council one winter evening when George Willing happened to be at home confined to his bed with a heavy cold.

It soon proved that the idea was a popular one. Others thought so too.

"He really can't last much longer when you stop to think it over. We ought to call a young man to help him, one who can step right into his boots in case he should resign, — you know what I mean."

Another version: "It would be a good idea anyway to have a younger man handling some of our affairs. The younger fellows have the latest ideas, you know, for instance, in running the social affairs and things like that. Not that I've got a single thing against our good old pastor, but I do think a younger man will put some pep into these members that have been dragging and those that are so far back in their dues."

"That's what I think," said another. "Pastor Willing is too old to get results any more. We'll never pull out of debt if we don't make some kind of change. The people are simply not giving. We've had a regular landslide backward ever since we put up that new church."

That meeting lasted until very late. Some resolutions were made, to be taken up again at the following meeting.

Meanwhile, in his bed at home, George, the old pastor, was burning with fever. He was supposed to sleep, but he couldn't get the affairs of his congregation off his mind.

"You've got to forget everything now," Mary told him very gently, sitting at the bed stroking his hot forehead. "Wait until you're well again, then we can talk about church matters."

"They've got a council meeting to-night," he said to her. "I ought to be there. Important business. Means have to be found how to cut down this big debt in some way."

"Sh! Never mind, George! Forget the church debts! You're a sick man now, and you must get well."

He sighed heavily, closed his eyes, but opened them again.

"Oh, they wouldn't bother me, Mary, if they'd only go down a little. We've been paying almost nothing but the interest. You know, — well, I did the best I could. I walked my feet sore and talked my throat dry, going from house to house, trying to make people see it. But they've got so many other things to buy in these modern times. The new church must be paid off."

"Of course it must! But the doctor said that you must rest. Please go to sleep — please! Dear, you don't want to get really sick."

"Oh, I'll be all right."

But she felt his forehead constantly, anxiously. She was afraid a higher temperature might develop and pneumonia set in. The doctor had cautioned her.

"Please go to sleep now, dear! Do it for me."

"Where are Ruth and mother?" he asked, looking up.

"Lie down, George. They're down in the living-room. Do you want them?"

"Oh, no. — And Betty?"

"She's working late. It's their busy season, she said this morning."

"She's working pretty hard, that child."

"Oh, don't worry about her now. She's young and strong."

"Yes, I know." He stirred, sighed. — "I wonder what they're doing at the council meeting," he murmured wearily.

"What they always do. Go to sleep." She suddenly grew impatient. "George, you simply must do what the doctor says."

"All right, Mary, all right. I'll try to sleep." He sighed and closed his eyes. "But I can't —"

In a few moments he had dropped off, and Mary breathed a silent prayer of thanks. Things had been so hard on him lately — all the work, the extra holiday sermons, the meetings concerning the church debts, his many trips in the interest of raising funds, the many cases of winter sicknesses in the congregation — all that. He had caught his own ailment at a funeral, standing bare-headed in the cemetery on a bitter cold day. She had warned him often against uncovering his head. But in the midst of a solemn service like that he always forgot himself.

All the strain of his work was partly on her. Every activity of his was hers as well. She helped carry all his mental burdens. When he laughed, she laughed; when he suffered, she suffered. All those years they had been together, and now there was no thinking of doing anything separately. Now as he lay there sick, she felt sick, too. Only her indomitable will kept her sitting stiffly there on the chair, watching him.

After a week he recovered completely, and they both laughed again. But in the third week after that, when he returned late in the evening from the next council meeting, she was up waiting for him, and she saw at once that something had happened.

"Why, what is it, dear?" She came towards him. "What is the matter?"

He waved her aside, and sat down, pale and serious. His shoulders drooped, his gray head was bowed. For a long time he would not answer. Then suddenly he laughed — a laugh that frightened and hurt her.

"They want to give me an assistant," he said dully, raising his head.

She breathed more easily at once.

"Oh, well, is that it? Dear, you had me frightened!"

He looked at her, smiling bitterly.

"An assistant," he repeated. "Do you know what that means, Mary?"

"O George!" She laughed queerly. "What should it mean? What else but that you'll have less work in your old days, that your difficult task will be made lighter."

"I don't know," he said, staring down again as if bewildered. "They suggested it, although I never asked for an assistant. And the way they acted and talked, it seemed as if — they'd rather have — my resignation."

"O George!" Her voice held instant alarm. "Don't imagine things!"

He simply raised a hand and dropped it again listlessly. A long silence fell. The mantel clock ticked loudly. Outside, the noise of the street seemed far away. Neither would meet the other's eye. He rose and put away his hat, which he had still been holding in his hand. He removed his collar and put on his old, comfortable coat. She sat motionless, watching him. He caught her pitiful glance and at once sat down at her side.

"Don't worry," he said lightly.

"I'm not worrying," she returned with bravery. "Only I think this is all very foolish, George. They just want to help you, of course."

"I hope so," he said. "But think — how will it be, Mary? A new man — a young man with all the strength

of youth. And I — old. I suppose it's right — only I just can't imagine it."

She suddenly had a happy thought.

"O George, did you suggest — John?"

"Yes," he said. "Of course I did. John will go on the list — unfortunately somewhere at the bottom."

"But why not at the top? He's your own son."

"I don't know, Mary. The list was made up in the way it will be presented to the congregation."

Another silence fell. Impulsively she took his hand and caressed it. He looked up into her eyes and smiled, and she smiled back. Little tears had sprung to her lids.

"Now, if it should be John," she began.

"If it's John," he said, "he — he will understand me. I'm queer, I guess. Every old man is queer, Mary."

She drew his head to her shoulder and put her arm about his neck.

"No," she said. "You were never queer, George. And you never will be. You're the finest man in the whole world."

As they sat in silence, footsteps were heard outside. He looked up.

"It's Betty," she explained. "She was out with Mr. Reed."

"Say nothing," he cautioned suddenly in a tense whisper.

The two young people entered the room, looking fresh and rosy after a drive in the cold air.

"Up yet?" cried Betty. "Oh, look at the two young lovers, Tom!"

Tom Reed laughed and came forward, extending his hand.

"Good evening, Pastor Willing! I haven't seen you

lately. Out of town. I suppose Betty told you. Well, well, you're certainly getting to look younger every day!"

George laughed. "Yes," he said, and through the little period of conversation that followed there was no sign that he lacked the usual cheerful spirit of his. Betty, in a merry mood, said and did many things that drew his smiles. But that whole night he did not sleep a single wink.

In the next voters' meeting of the congregation the matter regarding an assistant pastor was presented and passed. And in less than a month the new assistant was installed by George himself.

The new assistant was not young John Willing. George's dearest wish to have his own son as assistant had not been fulfilled. But the young man who had accepted the charge, it soon turned out, was in every way the kind of person George had hoped for.

It was not so grave a matter after all, this having an assistant. As months passed on, they worked side by side, the old and the young pastor, and not father and son nor two brothers could have agreed so well as they did. It took two exceptional men to make this exceptional case — George, whom we all know, and the new assistant, who was a man strangely like to what George had been more than forty years ago.

Because he was such a man, he was greatly liked by the people. He had a natural ability to preach, and he endeavored to learn as much as he could from his aged coworker. It seemed rather ridiculous therefore often to hear whispered remarks concerning the younger man's superiority in preaching when all the while that younger man was sincerely trying to pattern himself after the older.

But it was inevitable that he soon should preach oftener than at first. George receded gracefully, and though it caused him some level thought, yet there was not a trace

of envy. No man brought face to face with the fact that he is becoming practically useless will like it. Often on those Sundays when he was idle for the first time in his career he felt a hurt in his heart, and it was growing greater with each recurrence.

Perhaps if George had been of a different stamp, he could have borne it better. But all his life he had been indefatigably active. Working had always made him feel happy. To lose more than half of his share suddenly was bound to have its results on him.

Grandmother Meller died that winter. Her sudden passing after being bedridden only a few days with pneumonia, did nothing to raise George's spirit. It utterly depressed Mary, too, and Mary was the one who usually gave him the lift he needed.

The low moods he previously had sometimes experienced began to come more frequently. With more time to think, to consider his own case, he began to brood. Yes, he was old; he really should resign his work. Most men near seventy were retired. His presence meant double expense to the congregation. He had overheard remarks to that effect, which had upset him completely.

He would have retired at once, had it not been for the thought of the future. The impracticability of it appalled him. He was not in a position to offer his resignation and cut himself off from the means of living. His savings amounted to less than two thousand dollars. That, in modern times, would not reach very far. He owned no home, as so many men at seventy did who had followed other professions — doctors, lawyers, merchants, masons, even factory-workers and laborers.

The young minister was about to be married soon. In the case of George's resignation he would occupy the parsonage with his bride. And George — where would he take

Mary and his daughters? In the city, rents were high, and to seek out the merest hovel, to live half like a beggar, after all these years of honest work, that hardly appealed to him.

He saw nothing else in the end than to cling to what he had as long as he could. He saw the shadow of worry on his wife's face. It determined him all the more. He must stay. He could not give up.

So, for the better part of another year he stayed, preaching off and on, visiting the sick, but under the mental strain of what he suffered his health rapidly declined. In six months he looked but the shadow of his former self.

And in the tenth month he collapsed suddenly. All the strength, all the determination, and all the spirit crashed all at once.

George Willing was down.

The doctor who was called saw the wreck of what had once been a strong man. He shook his head.

"Rest," he whispered to Mary, who heard the word and wept bitterly. "No more preaching — never again. Seventy years almost. A lifetime of hard work and strain. Enough! He must quit. Let him spend his final years in peace."

Peace! With the prospect of a future without sufficient means. Without a home to go to. Without a plan of how to make these things possible.

Mary sat down and wrung her trembling hands and told herself bravely that she trusted in God. But George, lying on his back, weak beyond measure, and with a temporarily sick mind, lacked that strength. His eyes closed, his whole body was quivering, he looked into the future with doubt and fear.

CHAPTER XXII.

TOM REED'S TURN.

In the office of the Thomas Reed Advertising Agency, Tom Reed and Betty Willing were talking seriously.

He had come in that morning with his usual cheery greeting, and she had answered in a small, colorless voice. In a quick glance he saw that she had been crying. Instantly he was at her side.

"Why, Betty!"

She tried to hide it from him.

"We've got to get out all this Farnham copy this morning, Mr. Reed," she said, indicating a sheaf of papers. "It's the last day."

"Betty!" He sat on her desk, ignoring the Farnham copy. "What's the matter? What is it? Your father — he isn't worse?"

"No." She fingered the copy and did not look up. "It's all right, really."

"Well, but it doesn't seem to be. Something's all wrong. I could tell it all these days. The other evening when I saw him he seemed pretty cheerful again under the conditions."

"He always acts that way to others." Tears stood in her eyes. She blinked them away.

"Betty, please don't cry," he pleaded tenderly, taking her hand. "If anything's wrong, I'll fix it. I'll do anything to help. We'll close the office to-day. I'll call up the Farnham people."

"No, don't." She withdrew her hand.

He rose from the desk and stood watching her. She resumed work. A minute of silence intervened.

"There's something you won't tell me," he said evenly.

"And," he added with a little bitterness, "I thought we were close enough, so that you could trust me with anything. Believe me, I feel this quite a bit myself, Betty. I think a whole lot of your father."

She looked up, tenderness in her eyes for him.

"I know you do, Tom." She sighed. "It's just — all his troubles — that makes me so gloomy. That's all."

"Well, he's handed in his resignation, hasn't he?"

"Yes. Two weeks ago yesterday."

"Well, then there'll be no more troubles. It will lift a load he's been carrying steadily for a long time. It will build him up again. He'll spend his old days without any worries."

Betty looked away. She would never tell him what a good deal of her father's troubles were concerned with. He wouldn't understand, she feared. How could he? He knew so little of ministers and their life. And if he should find out, it might shake his faith. She was sure that he was beginning to be a Christian.

What she would not tell him Tom Reed found out for himself, by some process of observation and deduction, after several more visits to her father.

"Betty," he told her one morning, "your old daddy is improving, but he's greatly worried about something, — that's his trouble. You must be frank with me. Tell me everything." He sat down and looked at her. "Don't be angry now, but I sort of gathered that since his salary will stop in three months, he'll — well, he'll be in sort of a fix. Is that really a fact?"

She tried to avoid a truthful answer because of her pride.

"Why, that's absurd. Everything will be all right."

"No," he interrupted, "I want you to tell me, Betty. Your father wouldn't, and I've made it a point to find out."

"He'll not be in a fix; I'm going to take care of him!" she said suddenly, without really wanting to say it to him.

He paused, struck.

"Why, is it as bad as that, Betty?"

"As bad as what?"

"Well, I mean, is there no income — no kind of estate?"

She shook her head.

"O Tom, I knew you wouldn't understand."

"Yes, I will. Tell me," he hesitated.

"Well, he's got about sixteen hundred dollars saved. The interest of that is his whole personal income."

Tom Reed was stunned. "Sixteen hundred dollars!" he cried. "After working hard all his life!"

"Some ministers haven't that when they resign."

He stared at her. He couldn't fathom it at all. "You mean to say that a minister, and a successful one like your dad, can save no more all his life?"

"I told you you wouldn't understand."

"But I do. That is, I'm trying to, Betty." He paused, then asked another question. "Your father must have been working for awfully small money."

She looked at him.

"If I'd tell you what his salary was most of his life, you wouldn't believe it."

Tom Reed sat down, thinking hard.

"Well," he queried suddenly, "is that the general fact about ministers?"

"About many ministers I know. I guess there are some few who are a little better off, and some very few in famous churches who are well off. But the great majority are like that."

"Well, how in the world does it happen? What about the people who go to church? Don't they see it? Don't they appreciate enough what they're getting to pay a man at

least what the average run of intelligent men are paid? Sixteen hundred dollars saved in a lifetime! Why, look at me. I'm not even thirty, and I've got close to twenty thousand dollars invested."

"Yes, but you're in a business, Tom. A minister's work isn't business."

"I know. But it isn't a beggar's life either. It shouldn't be."

Betty sighed.

"I didn't want to tell you all this," she began and then suddenly stopped, her hand to her face, her eyes far away.

"No, I'm glad you told me," he said seriously. "But I don't understand yet, quite. If that's the case, how do most old ministers live?"

"Quite miserably, if you ask me. I've heard things."

"I mean, isn't there some form of pension or something."

"Oh, yes." She gazed out of the window. "That's how they live. It isn't called pension. It's a support fund. And the monthly amount they get to live on" — she hesitated — "that's another thing you wouldn't believe if I told you."

A queer pause fell. He rose and paced about. Betty watched him. She was desperately afraid in that moment that he would lose the things again which he had begun to believe.

"What are you thinking, Tom?" she asked at length when the silence continued.

"Of something I can't figure out," he said, turning and standing still. "The millions of people going to church — and the beggarly life of their ministers. How does it fit? Do the people mean what they profess? If they do, why don't they get together and change this condition? Doesn't

their religion have the power to —?" He stopped and looked at her. "I can't understand it, Betty."

"Tom, come here."

He came over. She spoke softly.

"Tom, listen. Don't make the mistake of blaming religion. Religion is right. And if there are some people who don't live up to it, that doesn't make it wrong. I was so happy that you had changed, happy to see your interest in these things. Don't — change back again, Tom."

"Betty!" He took her hands, put them both together and pressed them. "I'm not changing back. Never. I couldn't. Because I've seen myself what the truth is. I believe as you do. We have the same mind. — Do you believe me, Betty?"

"Yes."

He bent down suddenly and pressed his lips to her hair. "Darling! You'll marry me very soon now. I'm not going to ask you about it. I'm doing the talking. I'm alone in the world. I need you. Don't tell me you have to take care of your dad. I can take care of him and you, too."

Betty did not move, nor did she speak. His love, his gentleness, was wonderful and precious. In his grip her hands trembled a little. He released them and lifted her face.

"O Betty! I've never heard it from your lips that you love me. Say it now!"

"I love you!"

"And you will marry me?"

"Yes, Tom."

He kissed away the little tears that had gathered again in her eyes.

"I'm the happiest man living! Let's go now and ask your father's and your mother's consent. They'll be glad to give it, I know."

"Oh! But, Tom, this copy —"

"Never mind the copy. I'm so happy, little girl, I could lose a dozen contracts without a whimper."

"We'll come back and work it out to-night," she said.

He nodded. They left the office together.

That morning, in the parsonage, spirits seemed especially low. George was sitting up with his head on a pillow, looking about the room. Mary sat near him. From his position he could look through an open door into his study. His desk was there. And all his books. An unfinished sermon of his still lay on the desk. Five weeks it had lain there.

He drew a heavy sigh.

"A little over a month more, Mary," he said, referring to their being in the parsonage. "Then — where will we go?"

Mary answered, "Didn't Betty say she would find us a nice place, dear?"

"Poor Betty! We'll be a drain on her now. To rent a house or a flat here will be an expense. I can't expect much from the congregation after they have stopped my salary. They're too much in debt. And the support fund, you know what that covers. And we can't move anywhere else. Betty's work is here. Oh, it will be hard on her! If I were only stronger!"

"You will be strong again if you stop all this worrying."

"I wonder!" he said. He closed his eyes and let his mind float back slowly over all those busy years of his life. — "Do you remember, Mary, how we used to sit together in the woods in Sunken Hollow and dream? Do you remember how strong I was in those days, how I could work and study and never even feel it? How I could cut down trees! And in Iota — I used to walk for miles every morning. All the work there and the preaching — it was

like nothing to me. Those were wonderful days. And now — I can't even think without getting tired. Always tired — always utterly weary."

For the first time in his sickness Mary knew no answer. She had talked so much in trying to cheer and to comfort him that the sound of her own voice at last seemed to sicken her. She felt that what he said was true. They were both through with life, and like worn-out, useless things, life seemed ready to cast them away. She broke down and wept.

Seeing her like that made him ashamed. And shame gave him strength.

"We always forget," he said, "that God is still with us, Mary."

She raised her head and nodded.

Then, as they sat there, so entirely depressed, Betty and Tom Reed burst into the room with a world of joy on their faces.

No words were wasted in explaining that joy. Tom Reed told everything in a few brief sentences, holding Betty's hand and kissing it repeatedly as he spoke.

"And did I tell you," he finished, "I'm buying a nice house outside the city, a Duplex, two complete places in one, you know. And as a tenant, of course, I want none other than a good old friend of mine, who, at the same time, happens to be my future father-in-law. So that's settled. Betty, kiss your parents, and I'll follow suit."

CHAPTER XXIII.

CLOSING THE BOOK.

Thus it happened that through Tom Reed, a young man who had only lately been won for the church, George Willing's first problem was solved.

After the three months were over, the Willings moved into the Duplex house on the outskirts of the city. It was a fine building, finer than any the Willings had ever lived in, just new and modern in all respects and with pleasant surroundings. To rent this apartment at its full value would have cost a pretty penny; it would have been an absolute impossibility but for Tom Reed.

George Willing insisted on paying some rent at least, even though his son-in-law would not hear of it.

"We can do it," he told him frankly. "Our amount from the support fund is small enough, but the congregation has promised me a monthly income."

"How much?" Tom wanted to know.

George would not tell. He shook his head and smiled.

"Well, they have still much debt to pay on the new church," was all he said.

Tom gazed at him levelly. "Do you know how it ought to be with old ministers like you?" he said.

"Well, how?"

"They ought to get enough when they retire to live like other old people. It's certainly a shame they have to worry around in their old age with insufficient funds."

George sighed and thought it over.

"I thank God that I'm so fortunate," he confessed. "I know other pastors of my age and condition whose cases are altogether pitiable."

Tom Reed sat down with a businesslike air.

"This isn't the way it ought to be. You know I've been thinking. I don't believe that the great number of church people in this country actually know the conditions of a minister's life and what he has to put up with, especially in old age."

"I think that's quite right," George admitted seriously. "They are told of it often, but it isn't brought home to them in such a forceful way that they actually see and feel it. If they did really see, I'm sure most of them would gladly do things to change it."

"That's my point, exactly," cried Tom Reed. "I don't believe that the great run of people are such unfeeling, selfish creatures that they would actually care to see some of these good old fellows suffer with poverty." He rose excitedly. "Some day I'm going to put over a sort of campaign to broadcast information. I think people have to know and see the whole story of a minister's life to get the right slant on things: his younger days, with all the sacrifices, the small salary he gets most of the time, the hard work, which is rarely fully appreciated, the drain of it on his system, his family life, his household, his wife, and her struggles to make ends meet, the little bit they can save. All that. And then, when he gets too old to keep on, when most men lay aside work and worry, all the problems he still has to solve. A brochure like that would make good reading. It would surely tell the story."

George broke into easy laughter. He could laugh now, but three months ago he would not have laughed so easily.

"When you are ready to put that out," he said, "you can use my old diary. It's quite complete now."

"That's right! Just the thing. I'll do it. And when people find out the actual story, they'll respond. Why, one regular annual contribution — say the price of five gallons of gasoline from every man and woman in the

Church, would amount to more than enough to change the whole sorrowful business and put that pension fund on a normally running business basis."

"You have fine dreams," George said thoughtfully.

"The thing to do," said Tom, "is to stop the dreaming and make the dream an actuality."

"Of course," remarked George soberly, "we mustn't forget, no matter what happens, the Lord will always provide for His old servants."

"That's very true," agreed Tom, smiling. "I know my religion now. But talk is cheap. The Lord wants us to use our brains and our hands. He will provide for them through us."

After some argument Tom Reed consented at last, because his father-in-law kept on insisting, to take a little for the rent. But he took that money to his bank and established a trust fund for his sister-in-law Ruth, of course entirely without her knowing. Some day Ruth would be very much surprised to find out that she was the possessor of a small estate.

So to-day the Willings are living in the Duplex house, satisfied and happy. George, white-haired and bent just a little now, has gained strength and can be on his feet, browsing among his books, pottering about in the yard and in the garden. Mary is one with him in contentment.

Their memories of life are so very many. Often they sit together in the quiet evenings and discuss all the things that happened in the years that are past. Often George gets out that worn diary. Things that once made him fret and frown now make him smile. All the misfortunes of his existence have lost their strength; they are covered now with the golden sheen of mellow age and forgetfulness. And all the happy things that occurred now seem doubly happy.

"God has been good to us every day of our lives," George often says to Mary. "Sometimes we were too blind to see it. Sometimes we made the great mistake of losing our trust in Him."

Often he finds Mary bent over that diary herself, reviving old scenes and times. As he watches her, he sees her smiling and in the very next moment shedding a few tears.

"I tell you, it was a life," he says to her. "And if I had the choice, if I were young again, I'd choose the same thing all over again. It's been a *delightful road.*"

They are justly proud of everything: Mary, of all that George has done: George, of all that his good wife has accomplished; of their family, their children and grandchildren.

They are proud of their son-in-law Tom Reed, and they consider Betty a fortunate young woman.

Betty lives on the other side of that Duplex, growing more beautiful every day in her happiness with her husband. Whenever her old parents need her, it's just a few steps over. She takes those steps at a skip, her red hair flying in the wind. They do need her often, or at least they think they do, for they are growing older daily. Often George is compelled to give room to the following thought, "I certainly have a great blessing in Betty. If it wouldn't be for Betty, how would things be?"

But he puts that latter question aside. There are so many vital questions in life to be answered that he does not try to answer the perfectly useless ones. It is the manner of how things actually stand that is important. And George is happy.